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ALL AROUND WEEKLY.

"PHANTOM," THE PRAIRIE TRAPPER.

Barry seized the boy and raised him over the water. A girl dressed in white hurriedly descended the ladder and, with a cry of joy, ran to Harry.

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ALL AROUND WEEKLY

CONTAINING STORIES OF ALL KINDS

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"PHANTOM"

THE PRAIRIE TRAPPER

By "PAWNEE JACK"

CHAPTER I.

THE COCK OF THE WALK.

In a rude log cabin at the edge of a wide expanse of prairie stood the barroom of Jack Barry.

It was during the summer season, and, standing before the door of the inn, the tall prairie grass waving and bending before the wind resembled the billows of a boundless ocean.

Behind the bar, which was a rude contrivance made of unpainted pine boards, stood the owner of the place, a man so much below the ordinary size that he was almost dwarfish, but possessing a breadth of shoulders that was astonishing to the beholder.

He seemed to be as broad as he was long, and, as he waited upon his customers, only the immense proportions of his short bull neck and his deeply-scarred face arose above the counter.

The room, with the exception of a few chairs, contained nothing else, save and excepting a half-dozen barrels of whisky standing on end.

Upon these, at the time our story opens, were seated a half-dozen men, who swung their feet unceasingly, and beat a tattoo with their heels upon the staves of the barrels.

There was an uniformity in their dress, and a description of one would answer for all.

A heavy, rude, black slouched hat; a weather-stained flannel shirt; pants tucked into a pair of cow-skin boots, whose leather had been tanned by the sun and the hot sand of the roads until it had become of a dark yellow color.

Each one wore a heavy leathern belt around his waist, and every belt contained a brace of revolvers.

The chairs were empty, for these rude and uncouth men preferred a seat above the ordinary style, as it gave them greater liberty for their legs, and rested their tired limbs better than the customary seat.

They were all old and tried scouts and trappers, and they knew best how to rest themselves.

"Who's seen Warlock around lately?" inquired Barry, as he leaned his chin on the bar.

The men looked at each other and then at their questioner, but there was no reply.

"Then nobody has seen him," said Barry, as he became tired waiting for an answer. "He's getting worse and worse. His trade here used to be worth something, but now I wouldn't give a rap for it for a whole year."

"If the cuss ain't in love, then I don't know a wildcat when I see him," replied one.

"If I was a gal, I'd sooner fall in love with a wildcat

than him. He's getting to be a reg'lar puzzle. Yer can't put yer finger on him no more than you can on a flea," said another.

"He don't think we is good enough for him," said Bill Brooks, as he jumped off the barrel upon which he was sitting, and struck the top of the bar a blow with his fists that made the glasses jingle.

"Thar's where the trouble is. He don't think we is good enough for him. That's the way with them city-bred fellers. They come out here, and they're civil and polite enough till they learn the business, and then they cuts loose from us as though we was pizen. I'm getting riled about it, I am."

"And I don't like it for a cent either, Brooks," said Jack Barry. "I followed him over the prairie t'other day. We were both on horseback, and when I got within a quarter of a mile of him, I missed him all off a sudden.

"The horse was still galloping on ahead like the wind, but Warlock was nowhar. When I got up to the place where I thought he had fallen off the animal, I searched the grass, but he wasn't thar. Yer can sweep the floor with me if I don't think he is a reg'lar phantom."

"A phantom! None of your supernatural stuff here, Jack," replied Brooks. "Come, boys, let's take a swaller. This kind o' talk sticks in my gullet and makes me thirsty. A phantom, eh, Barry! That p'int is easily settled."

"Not so easily settled as you think for," said Jack, as he put the glasses and the bottle on the bar for his customers to help themselves. "Why, the whole world since the days of Adam has been turned topsy-turvy by ghosts and phantoms and sich like, and that matter has never been settled yet. How in thunder, then, is an old trapper, what don't know nothing about whys and wherefores, goin' for to settle it?"

"Keep your head between your shoulders, Jack, and don't let it go driftin' around in search of such things, or you'll lose it."

"I can take care of my head, Brooks!" yelled Barry, as he jumped on the top of the bar and flourished a revolver. "I'm the cock of the walk, I am! I'm king! Who's a-goin' to take that knowledge-box from between these shoulders? Is it you, Bill Brooks?"

The next minute the cocked revolver was pointed at Bill's heart.

"Oh, put up your pepper-box, and get down and take a swaller of whisky. You is all right, Jack, you is. You mustn't go off half-cocked. Nothin' personal. Only speakin' generally. Put up your shootin'-iron."

Somewhat appeased, Barry got down from the bar.

"Now," resumed Brooks, "I'll go on. You think he is a phantom. Now, if he is, a ball from a shooter fired at him can't harm him. That's the way to settle the matter. Try the power of a six-shooter on his carcass!"

"But suppose you kill him, Bill?" said one of the others.

"Then thar will be only one varmint less roamin' the prairies."

"Halloo! who's this a-comin' this way! He's a stranger in these parts, sartain."

The remark of Jack Barry was caused by the arrival of a man who was at that moment dismounting from his horse in front of the inn.

"That's Colonel Richards," replied Brooks. "He bought the old ranch down to the forks. He's come out here with his family, and he's a-goin' to work. He is an old army officer, and has got plenty of the needful. He's a-comin' here."

"Mornin', colonel," said Jack. "Reckon yer don't have such air as this in your eastern cities. What'll yer have?"

"It ain't what *I'll* have. What will *you* have? Come, boys, we are to be neighbors, and we must be neighborly. This is a wild region, and as we are few we must stick together."

"Like the gum to a pine tree, eh, colonel?" said Brooks, as he removed a huge chew of tobacco from his jaws and let it fall upon the floor at his feet.

As Colonel Richards raised his glass upward and exclaimed: "Here's long life to you, boys!" a pistol shot was heard.

The tumbler was shivered in his hand, and the liquor it contained fell upon the floor.

He gazed around him with considerable anxiety.

What kind of a crib had he got into, then?

The other inmates of the cabin had swallowed the contents of their tumblers, had seated themselves upon the heads of the different barrels, and had commenced to beat the old-time tattoo with their heels before the colonel began to divine the cause of the mishap.

On the top of the bar stood Jack Barry. In his hand he grasped a revolver, from an empty chamber of which the smoke still slowly issued.

"What in thunder do you mean?" inquired Richards, as he put his hand behind him to draw his pistol.

"Here, none of that!" exclaimed Brooks, as he pointed his weapon at the colonel's head. "Take your hand off that shooter, or I'll give yer a brand new dose of lead. You mustn't mind Jack. That's only one of his ways of showing attention to his most favored customers. He'd have never done that to us if we was about to swaller a centipede—you bet!"

"Don't be afraid, colonel; there was a fly in it," said Jack, as he jumped down from the bar.

"Fly be hanged!" said Richards. "You are talking to an old army officer now. A fly in it, eh? There was a ball in it, and it whizzed too close to my head for comfort."

"I don't mean that thar was a fly in the shooter, stranger. There was a fly in the whisky. In another

minnit yer would have swallered it. This is yer first visit to the 'Wild Buffalo,' and I wants ter see that yer is treated right. I couldn't get word to yer in time to prevent a catastrophe. No harm done, I hope, except to the tumbler?"

"Harm?" exclaimed Brooks, contemptuously. "He kin consider himself highly honored. To my sartain knowledge, Jack Barry hasn't done that afore in a week, and then it was to scare a beetle away from Warlock's nose when he was imbibin'. Jack allers seemed to take a likin' to that cuss—and yer can scalp me if here he ain't! Phantom, eh? If he ain't flesh and blood and muscle, then thar ain't any such thing this side o' the moon."

"Mornin', Warlock," said Barry. "Anything stirrin' about?"

"Nothing, Jack not even a coyote. As for buffalo, I'm afraid they've skipped the ranch for good and all. The population is gettin' too thick hereabouts for the animals."

Warlock was a tall, wiry specimen of a trapper.

He was as straight as a pine tree, as strong as a young grizzly, and had a piercing black eye that took in everything in the room at a glance.

He gazed around at the inmates of the place with a scornful expression until his eyes fell on Richards.

Then he nodded coldly.

"I hope I am not to be considered as an intruder, sir," said Richards. "I bought the old ranch where Squire Walters formerly lived. He has moved away, and I have taken his place. One goes and another comes—that's all. I trust you do not consider that as overcrowding the place."

Without deigning to reply, Warlock walked over to the bar, and leaning his elbow upon it, turned his face toward the others.

"Here, this won't do, Warlock," said Brooks, as he again descended from his bench on the top of the barrel. "Thi gentleman is a stranger here, and we must receive him kindly. Come, don't be offish to-day. Let's us drink his health."

"Be it as you say, Bill—I'll join yer. If yer knows him, all right, and sarcumstances alter cases. Perhaps I am a little off to-day."

The glasses were filled, and Brooks exclaimed as he held his glass above his head:

"Here's the health of Colonel Richards, our new neighbor."

"What!" exclaimed Warlock, in a loud voice "You want me to drink that, do yer? That's what I think of the man who owns that name."

He dashed the tumbler to the floor, and ground the fragments into powder with the heel of his cowskin boot.

"Draw your shootin'-irons, boys," yelled Brooks, in a terrible rage. "This man is a stranger in these parts, and I won't have him insulted. Here's a phantom. Let's try whether he's one or not."

Bill Brooks drew his revolver, and waved it above his head, but before he could fire it a ball struck it and wrenched it from his grasp.

Jack Barry had fired the shot.

He had again jumped upon the top of the bar and was yelling like a wild Indian.

"Leave yer shootin'-irons where they is, you swearin' idjits, or I'll put a leak in every mother's son of yer. It don't make no difference whether Warlock is a phantom or not, or whether he drunk the toast or not. He's my friend, and I'm a-goin' to stand by him."

Barry ran along the top of the bar with short, quick steps, and acted like an enraged gorilla.

His eyes flashed, his bosom heaved, and as he swung his deadly pistol about, the crowd were overawed and resumed their seats.

They knew it was certain death to several, at least, of their number to provoke him further.

They remembered several melees that they had witnessed in that room, and they knew well how many fellows who had defied Jack in his stronghold had bitten the dust.

"Do you want war or peace, Colonel Richards?" said Barry, as the others resumed their seats.

"I do not wish any trouble, sir. I regret that it has occurred. You cannot blame me for it."

"But I can your friends behind you, though. Once for all, I want it understood that Warlock is my friend. I'm the cock of the walk, I am. I'm king. Thar's no sich word as fizzle with me."

This was Barry's manner of challenging his enemies, but as no one disputed his right to both titles, he subsided and jumped down again behind the bar.

"Good-by, Jack," said Warlock, who all this time had stood coolly leaning on the bar; "I'll drop in ag'in. Thar's a good many years in a man's life, and thar's plenty of time to settle old scores."

He left the place, jumped on his horse, and sped across the prairie with the speed of a hare.

"There was a threat in his last remark," said Richards, as he stood by the side of Bill Brooks at the barroom door and watched the receding form of Warlock.

"In Heaven's name, who is he?"

"Who is he, colonel? He is Wild Warlock, the Prairie Phantom. He owes you a grudge for something. Look out for him, for he never let's go."

CHAPTER II.

THE PRAIRIE PHANTOM.

The remarks of Bill Brooks produced an alarming effect upon the mind of Colonel Richards.

He endeavored, by straining his memory, to recall the features or the name of Wild Warlock, but he failed.

Try as he would, he could not remember him, and why the trapper had become his enemy puzzled him sorely.

That he was a dangerous enemy he well knew, and he had no doubt that Warlock would injure him at the first opportunity.

Perhaps some day, while driving through the tall grass of the prairie, the Phantom might pounce upon him and pin him to the earth.

There his body might lie for years undiscovered, and in coming years his bleached bones would excite the surprise of some strolling mountebanks.

A well-directed bullet fired in the thicket might lay him low.

"I am not going to be murdered," said Richards, as he pondered upon the danger that threatened him. "My only safety lies in striking the first blow, and strike I shall. I must get rid of this Warlock."

He armed himself with his pistols, and seizing his rifle, he mounted his horse and started for the tavern.

Bill Brooks and the same men were there whom he had met before.

They were still sitting upon the heads of the whisky barrels, drumming with their heels, and it seemed to the colonel as though they had sat there since he last visited the place.

Jack Barry was not behind the bar.

"Mornin', colonel," said Brooks, as he jumped to the floor. "You're right smart this mornin'. You must have risen before the turkeys to get here at this hour, for it's a big bit of a ride from the old ranch to Jack Barry's tavern."

"Yes; I never lie abed late, Brooks. But where's Barry?"

"Oh, he's down below in the cellar mixin' his drinks—weakenin 'em down, I suppose. What in thunder he does it for bothers me, for everybody knows they is watery enough now."

"How does he get there?"

"Trapdoor under the bar. That answers a double purpose. He kin retreat that way if it gets too hot here. Why, colonel, I've seen bullets a-flyin' around in this room like hail stones. Then Barry gets down thar till it blows over. He's a cute one, you bet."

"You don't seem to be friendly with this Wild Warlock, eh, Brooks?" said Richards, as he placed his arm in that of his companion and led him to one corner of the room where they could converse without being overheard.

"Friendly! I guess not. Why should I be friendly? He ain't one of us. He's too stuck-up and proud, and when he meets us, instead of being sociable like, he sticks up his nose. Thar ain't anybody around here that I dislikes more than I do him. But I'll get square on him some day, and I'll take my time."

"But he is a favorite with your companions, is he not, Brooks?

"A favorite, eh? What, with them coves thar? Why, see here, colonel, thar's not one of them fellers but would put a nail in his coffin and sing a hymn of joy while they were doing it. A favorite, eh? Does a man ever learn to love a hyena or a sneakin' wolf? No, sir-e-e."

"Well, I suppose he'll put me out of the way some day," muttered the colonel, throwing the remark out as a feeler, and watching the effect it would have on his listener.

"He will if he can, colonel, but he won't if Bill Brooks and his pals can stop it. No, sir, we intends to stick by yer, colonel, and if thar's to be any shootin' done, we're goin' to take a hand in."

"But what good will your shooting be after I am dead, Brooks? If I am to be protected I should be protected now."

This was a new phase of the matter to Brooks, and he stroked his long beard as he revolved the matter in his mind.

"You're right, colonel—you're right every time. Your army trainin' is a-sarvin' you well in this emergency. Let us talk to the boys and see what they advise. I tell you what it is, stranger, when we pull together thar's nothin' can stand afore us any more than a sapling could stand up afore a blizzard."

They walked over to the whisky barrels, and Brooks began to talk to his companions.

"Say, boys, this feller, Warlock, has got an old grudge ag'in Colonel Richards. We all know what that means. No man that he holds a grudge ag'in can live. Now the colonel has either got to do one of two things—stay here and kick the bucket, or vamoose the ranch and live. Now, all I has to say is that I want him to stay here, and, for one, I'll protect him."

"So will I," exclaimed another. "Warlock has been a nuisance around here long enough, and he ought to be silenced. Let's get rid of him right away—to-day—this hour. Delay is dangerous with that fellow. The first thing the colonel knows he'll have a bullet through his brain, and then he won't know nothin'."

"Then we'll lay him out at once," said another. "This is about his time for comin' this way. All we got to do is to hide in the tall grass, and pop him off when he appears."

"Agreed," said Brooks. "Are you all armed?"

Each man pulled a brace of revolvers from his belt, and flourished them above his head.

"Key-reet," said Brooks, as his eyes glistened with pleasure at the prospect of getting rid of his old enemy. "Then we will go at once."

"I'm ready," added the colonel. "I dislike this manner of fighting. I prefer meeting my enemy in the open field, face to face, and weapon to weapon; but if this fellow, Warlock, deals in assassination, we must meet him and beat him at his own game."

"Thar's just the p'int, colonel; you must not go with us," said one.

"I insist upon going, sir. You are defending me, and I claim at least the right to partake of your danger."

"Danger!" exclaimed Brooks. "Go home, colonel. Thar's where the danger is. Why, while you're been palaverin' here, he may be skulkin' around your house, waitin' to get a shot at some of your family."

The colonel turned pale, and began to tremble with anxiety.

"Is he so desperate a ruffian, then?" he inquired, as he seized his rifle.

"Him! He stops at nothing. He might draw the line at a nursin' baby, but I have my doubts. Git, colonel, and leave the rest to us."

With an anxious face Richards left the tavern, and drove away at a breakneck pace.

"Come on, boys," said Brooks, after the colonel had departed. "Now to finish the job. We've had it on our minds for some time, and we'll never get a better opportunity. The colonel thinks we're doing this on his account. Let him keep on thinkin' so. It won't do us any harm, and it will be an excuse for us if we gets hauled up hereafter; come on."

They left the inn, but scarcely had they departed when the big neck and ponderous head of Jack Barry appeared above the bar.

His eyes shone with an angry fire, and his teeth were tightly clenched.

He watched the figures of the receding trappers until they entered the tall grass of the prairie.

"They thought I was down in the cellar, did they? All right. But I heard every word the murderous villains said. They're goin' to murder Warlock, are they? Well, perhaps they are. Then, ag'in, perhaps they aren't. Look our for yourselves, my gay galoots, for I'm comin' on your trail, and you better have a tribe of Cheyennes arter you than Jack Barry when he's angered as he is to-day. Take care I don't make some of you bite the dust afore you comes back."

He jumped down upon the floor and left the tavern.

He reached the tall grass and followed in the path of those who had preceded him.

His diminutive size was greatly in his favor, for while he could easily see those ahead, they could not see him at all.

The grass hid him completely from view.

They reached a spot and halted.

With cautious movements Barry crawled forward until he got within close pistol range.

From this position he could easily hear every word they uttered.

"He'll be along here presently," said Brooks. "He allers make a beeline for Jack Barry's tavern, and we're exactly on the line."

"Let's give him a volley when he comes," said one. "It won't do to take any risks, for if we only wound him and he gets about ag'in he'll make this place so hot for us that we'll have to skip."

"Agreed," said Brooks. "We'll fix his flint for good and all this time."

During all this time Jack Barry, from his place of concealment, listened to every word, and they cut him to the heart.

It was by the greatest effort that he remained quiet.

He was anxious to jump into the center of the crowd of assassins and shoot them where they stood.

He was perfectly fearless, for he had often faced, single-handed, a crowd of desperate men before.

He was a dead shot with his pistol, and his fame had spread far and wide.

After a time, a horseman appeared in the distance.

"That's him, boys. That's Wild Warlock," said Brooks. "He's coming right towards us at a right lively gait. Get yer shootin'-irons ready, and give it to him good when he gets in range."

They drew their revolvers and cocked them. One of the gang carelessly held his slightly above the level of the top of the tall grass.

Jack Barry saw it.

In a moment he drew his pistol and fired at it.

The ball struck the weapon, and sent it spinning away many yards in the grass, where it was lost.

"Who in thunder fired that shot?" yelled the trapper, when he somewhat recovered from his surprise.

"See here; it won't do to act like that. That shot came from behind me. Don't you fellows act so carelessly," said Brooks. "The first thing you know, you'll be giving the whole thing away."

Jack Barry with difficulty suppressed a laugh.

The fact was that the trappers had scattered themselves in the grass, and they supposed that one of the gang had fired the shot.

Warlock was still some distance away, but the way he acted after the discharge of the pistol indicated that the report had reached his ears.

He checked his horse slightly and lifted his rifle as if to examine the lock.

Jack Barry smiled through his clenched teeth when he discovered it.

Warlock was apprised of a probable danger, and was on the alert.

The pistol shot, then, had really been of some advantage.

"Hang me if he ain't tumbled off his horse ag'in!" yelled one. "That's the old game. Now let us foller him up and catch him. We never had such a chance to fathom this mystery, and we're bound to succeed now."

The trappers gazed in the direction in which they had seen Warlock approaching a moment ago.

The horse was not only riderless, but was now galloping away in the direction of a small patch of woods about three miles distant, that seemed as peculiar in the prairie as an oasis in a desert.

"That animal allus turns tail that way when the phantom leaves his back," exclaimed Brown. "Hang me if I ever saw or heard of anything like it. Come, let's get thar quick!"

They ran through the tall grass, and after some time they reached the spot where, as near as they could calculate, Warlock had fallen from the horse.

Jack Barry followed them closely, and kept a close watch on their movements.

They searched for the man, but found nothing.

The disappointment which they felt they could not conceal, and it made them irritable.

"That shot done the business for us," said Brooks; "and if I knowed who fired it I'd put a leak in his body, so help me."

They all swore they had not fired it.

They looked puzzled and perplexed.

Jack Barry grinned like a tickled baboon.

"They're beat. They ain't a-goin' to do nothing today, and before to-morrow comes I will see Warlock and put him on his guard. I'd like to put a ball in Brooks' head, though. He put this job up, and I heard him do it. No, I will not kill him yet, but I'll make him scratch his head a bit."

He took deliberate aim at Brooks, fired, and the fellow's hat was lifted from his head.

"Now, I suppose some of you fellows that are searching in the grass will say that you didn't fire that shot! Come in here, every mother's son of you, and show me your pistols!" cried Brooks, with evident alarm.

The order was obeyed quickly, for the superstitious stories they had heard concerning the Prairie Phantom, and the peculiar proceedings at that time, began to work upon their nerves.

Every cartridge was intact.

"Let's get back to the tavern, boys," said Brooks. "The jig is up for to-day. If we stay here much longer, some of us will never get back."

They turned their face homeward and with rapid steps soon reached the tavern.

When they entered, Jack Barry was behind the bar, with his chin resting on the counter, and grinning maliciously.

"Halloo! Where on earth have you fellows been all this time, eh? Huntin' coyotes, pickin' prairie flowers, or what have you been doin'? Warlock has been waitin' here for nearly an hour for you to take a drink with him, and at last he had to do his guzzling alone."

"What!" exclaimed Brooks, in astonishment. "Do you mean to say that he's been here?"

"Didn't I say it already?"

The trappers adjourned to one corner of the room, sorely perplexed and troubled, much to the gratification of Barry, who had invented the story to still further mystify them.

"You didn't answer my question," said Jack, after a pause. "I asked you where you had been, and you all turned on your heels. Do you know who I am?"

"Only taking a bit of a stroll across the prairie, Jack," said Brooks.

"That's a lie," exclaimed Barry, as he jumped on top of the counter, and swung his revolver above his head, "that's a lie! People who only go out to take a stroll don't come into this tavern with bullet holes in their hats, Bill Brooks. You've deceived me. You've been acting crooked, and I'm going to get square. I'm king—I'm cock of the walk; there's no such thing as fizzle with me."

The trappers were alarmed as they looked at Barry.

He was fairly dancing with anger, and his eyes glistened like balls of fire.

To cross him at such a time was certain death, that they well knew.

They feared that he would open fire upon them, and, with a wild rush, they ran from the place and left him alone.

CHAPTER III.

SEEKING REVENGE.

Warlock was duly informed of the action of Bill Brooks and his companions and the news angered him greatly.

If they had crossed his path that day the result would have been disastrous.

The part that Colonel Richards took also excited the trapper to the highest pitch, and he determined to be avenged.

"I must fight them in the way they have selected themselves," said Warlock, as he left Barry's tavern and started in the direction of the old ranch.

"If they conceal themselves in the grass, and fire covert-

ly upon me as I pass, I will hide myself behind trees and rocks, and will kill them as they go by. I shall make them swallow their own poison."

It was night when he left Barry's. He was afoot, and the faint light of the stars was the only light that guided his footsteps.

He traveled along the road with quick steps, for he did not now fear an ambuscade.

Why should he? He was not avoiding his enemies now. He was seeking them, and it was not to be supposed that they anticipated such an act on his part.

It was a long walk to the old ranch, but he reached it at last.

The house was brilliantly lighted, and this discovery pleased Warlock immensely.

He feared that they might have fled before he had wreaked his vengeance.

He approached the house from the rear.

He had not advanced far before he heard a low growl near him.

He poised his rifle, but before he could use it he was set upon by a ferocious bloodhound.

His gun, by the force of the contact, was wrenched from his grasp.

In the next moment, the brute seized Warlock by the breast of his coat, and almost hurled him to the ground.

The suddenness of the attack disconcerted the trapper for an instant, but he was soon on his guard.

He drew his long knife from his belt.

A blow from the trapper's knife reached his heart and settled his voice forever.

"I must be wary," said Warlock, as he cautiously resumed his advance toward the house. "They are evidently on the alert, or they would not have put a bloodhound on guard. I've foiled them, however. I will surprise them, for they expect the dog to give warning of my approach. Sarcumstances is ag'in them."

The light from within shone through a rear window.

He crept toward it and glanced within.

The door connecting the back room with the one in front was open.

In the front room sat his enemy, Richards.

The line between them was a straight one, and with his rifle the trapper could easily kill him.

By his side sat his wife.

At the end of the table sat his son, a youth of fifteen summers.

There was another person, a lady, in the room, but Warlock could not see her.

She was playing upon a harp, and was singing with much feeling, the words of "Auld Lang Syne."

Warlock raised his rifle and pointed it at his enemy.

His finger was upon the trigger, and only the pressure of a hair stood between Richards and eternity.

Warlock hesitated. Should he pull the trigger or not?

He was revengeful, but he was not inhuman.

His heart cried out for vengeance, but he did not desire that it should be intermingled with the shrieks of widow and orphans.

"They tried to murder me away out on the prairie, far away from the eyes of mortals," muttered Warlock. "It was cowardly, but it was merciful. None but Heaven would see the deed. And what am I about to do? Murder Richards before the eyes of his wife and children. I can't do it. I must plan some other way."

He retreated from the window, and concealed himself behind a tree to arrange some other plan of operations.

"I have it," he exclaimed. "Here is the barn behind here. I will set it afire. Richards will come forth from the house to extinguish the fire, and I will fix him. No eye will witness it but my own. I will be far away before his body is discovered, and the widow's cries will not reach my ears. Suppose they should? Did the cries of my widowed mother have any effect upon this heartless scoundrel? None!"

When Warlock left the window and concealed himself behind the tree, he had been seen.

In the barn, hidden at that moment in the loft, was Sim Hadden, a terror in the neighborhood, and one of the gang that frequented Jack Barry's tavern.

He had been employed by Richards to watch the ranch at night.

He had arrived at his post but a few minutes before, and that accounted for Warlock having escaped detention when he entered upon the grounds.

"If it ain't the Phantom," said Hadden, with a cry of joy. "I've got him now, and if I don't put a hole in him, then I'm no good. Wouldn't the boys give something for this chance? When I get through with him thar won't be anything left for anybody else. He's a-coming this way. I'll wait till he gets close up, and then I'll pop him over."

Hadden quietly cocked his rifle and poised it ready for immediate use.

Warlock left the tree, and walked slowly toward the barn.

He nearly reached it.

Hadden had taken deliberate aim, and his finger was upon the trigger of the rifle.

He was about to pull it when a man jumped upon him from behind.

With a yell Hadden dropped his rifle, and the two fell heavily to the ground below.

"You would kill Warlock, would you—would you—would you?"

At every word a dagger was thrust into the heart of Hadden.

"You won't try it again, will you, Sim Hadden? You've handed in your checks and I've lost a good customer. You won't guzzle any more whisky, will you, eh? I'm king—I'm cock of the walk. There's no such word as fizzle with me."

"Jack Barry," exclaimed Warlock, as he fairly dragged the tavern keeper from the body of Hadden as he would an enraged bull dog. "For Heaven's sake, what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? What was that infernal Hadden doing here? He came here to kill yer, Warlock, and I came here to save yer, and I've done it, too. I followed you when you left the tavern. There was blood in your eye, and I saw it. There was murder in your heart, and I knew it. I feared that you would come here alone, and get overmatched in p'int of numbers, and be killed, so I closed the tavern and came, too.

"I saw you p'int yer rifle at Richards in that room, and while I was waitin' for the report, and prayin' for the report, yer dropped the muzzle and got behind the tree. Then I saw Sim Hadden come in with his wife, and I left you, and followed him into the loft of the barn. When he got into the openin' whar they puts the hay, and p'inted his shootin'-iron at yer, I just leaped on him and we both fell to the ground. He had yer kivered, Warlock, and if I hadn't been thar, you would have been a phantom afore this.

"But I'm down on yer, Warlock—I'm down on yer. You had a chance to nail the colonel, and you let it slip. He wanted to put you out of the way, and he came mighty near doin' it, too. Why didn't you draw bead on that murderin' villain, Richards?"

"Because his wife and children sat in the same room, Jack, and I didn't have the heart to do it."

"O-ho! Yer getting squeamish, are yer? Yer getting tender-hearted in your old days. I'm ashamed o' you, Warlock. I thought you had more nerve than to do such a thing as that. Go back and be a man, and shoot him like a dog."

"I've a better plan, Jack."

"Then spit it out, and let me know what it is. Time is pressin', and I must get back to the tavern. What are you going to do?"

"Burn the barn, draw the dog out of his kennel, and shoot him where he stands."

"Good! I've got matches. I'll start the blaze, and you attend to the colonel when he comes out of his hole."

He went up to the hay-loft, and set fire to the hay.

In a short time the blaze worked through the roof, and began to illuminate the country around.

The fire, after some time, was seen by the inmates of the house, and when the back door was opened, they stood in line.

The wife of Richards stood behind her husband. A lady stood behind the wife, and the agitated face of the boy brought up the rear.

"Why in thunder don't you fire?" whispered Barry.

"If I do I may kill some of the others, Jack."

"Suppose you do? Such cattle is better out of the world than in it."

"They never harmed me."

"Oh, give me the rifle, Warlock! You are chicken-hearted to-night. What's got into you, anyhow?"

"Be patient, Jack; I'll fire when the proper time comes. See, now they're separating."

"Yes, they're separating, if that's what you call it. They've all gone back into the house. Do you know what for?"

"Buckets, I suppose, to extinguish the fire. Now Richards will come here, and then I shall obtain my revenge."

"Buckets be hanged! He's gone in for his rifle—that's what he's gone for; and he's a dead shot, too. Yer let the golden opportunity slip by."

The fire by this time had assumed grand proportions. The large barn was enveloped in flames, which roared in the quietness of the night.

The wood crackled, while the cattle within bellowed with fear.

The place was as light as day, when suddenly a tongue of flame brighter and larger than the rest illumined the place.

Then the back door of the house opened, and a lady dressed in white appeared and gazed for a moment upon the devouring elements.

When Warlock saw her, he gave a terrible groan, and almost fell to the ground.

Barry caught him and looked with surprise into his pale face.

"Take me away, Jack. I'll be all right soon. Take me away at once. Don't ask any questions. Here's my rifle. Let us get."

They hurried from the place and got upon the road.

By this time Warlock had recovered from his temporary weakness, and was hurrying along.

The report of a rifle was heard, and a ball whizzed by in close proximity to Barry's head.

"They've seen us, Jack. Let's leave the road and take to the tall grass."

"All right, Warlock. You get under cover. I'll give them a shot and join you."

"No. You must not fire. I will not allow you to fire; give me the rifle, Jack."

Barry endeavored to retain possession of the weapon, but Warlock wrenched it from his grasp.

They fled through the tall prairie grass, reached the tavern, and entered the place.

"Give me a big horn of whisky, Jack," said Warlock, as he leaned upon the bar, panting with excitement.

"There you are, drink it down. Why, you haven't the strength of a child. What caused this, Warlock?"

"She died ten years ago, Jack," said Warlock, endeavoring to suppress his excitement.

"Are you out of your mind, man? What are you talking about? Who died ten years ago?"

"She that I saw to-night. My sister, Jack. She died ten years ago."

"Do you mean to tell me to my face that your sister died ten years ago, and that you seen her to-night?"

Barry glanced anxiously at his comrade. He feared that he had become insane.

"No, Jack, I didn't see *her*."

"Then what did you see?"

"Her ghost, Jack. *I saw her ghost!*"

Warlock threw himself into a chair to collect his scattered senses, and shortly left the tavern.

CHAPTER IV.

FLANKING AN ENEMY.

As days passed by and Warlock had time to ponder over the events of that terrible night, he began to doubt the evidence of his own senses.

His sister Mathilde had died ten years before, some years after he had left home, and had penetrated the wilds of the great West to become a trapper and scout.

He had received a letter to that effect, and upon that subject his mind was fully settled.

He remembered that on the night that he attacked the house he was laboring under considerable excitement, and he was convinced that he had labored under a delusion.

He was anxious to know whether Jack Barry had seen the vision, but he did not care to refer to the subject again.

Barry had not spoken about it, and Warlock slowly arrived at the conclusion that he had seen nothing.

After this result had been reached by a course of reasoning that at least satisfied himself, his former manner returned, and he again became the wild, reckless and adventurous Warlock.

The desire to revenge himself upon Richards was as great as ever, but he would seek him elsewhere.

He would never again plant his foot upon the ranch.

Bill Brooks and his companions, their number now lessened by the death of Sim Hadden, visited the tavern as before, sat all day long upon the heads of the barrels, and beat their heels against the staves.

It was neutral ground, and while they were there they were safe, for no one dared molest them, not even Warlock himself.

Jack Barry protected his customers, whether friend or enemy, and no one cared to risk his deadly anger by violating the most sacred rule of the tavern.

Colonel Richards profited by the danger which he had escaped on the night when his bloodhound was killed and his barn burned.

Every night thereafter his house was well guarded.

Armed with rifles, Brooks was there to share the watches of the night with his companions, and all through the dark hours the place was carefully patroled.

But Warlock did not appear.

That he had changed his plans was evident to Richards, and after a time he dismissed Brooks and his followers and assumed the defense of the house himself with such assistance as he could obtain from his farmhands.

The colonel was disappointed at the failure of Warlock to make an attack.

He knew the strength and the advantage of defensive operations.

With the preparation he made to resist an attack he could have held a small army at bay.

If his enemy had ventured to attack him then his certain annihilation was evident, and the mind of Richards would have been relieved.

"We must change our plans, colonel," said Brooks, one day, as he accosted him on the road. "We must come out of our cover to follow him to his stronghold."

"I follow him no more, Brooks," replied Richards. "I made a mistake in the beginning. I am satisfied of that now it is too late. If I had suffered his threat to pass unnoticed there would never have been an altercation. But I was misled in regard to the character of this Warlock. Now he is against me."

"Then we will strike a blow for you, colonel."

"No. Excuse me, Brooks, but I will not allow any man to strike another blow for me. I am done. If Warlock and I meet we will fight it out. I know you have some grievance, and if you fight it is to be on your individual account, and not on mine."

They parted, and with a scowl Brooks went to the tavern.

The next morning they did not appear. The hour of noon arrived, but yet they failed to show up.

Barry began to grow anxious and nervous, and in his moments of excitement he jumped over the bar like a stray hound, and went to the door, and looked out upon the road.

"Thar's somethin' crooked goin' on," said Jack.

"Them fellers haven't missed a day this year but what some of them were here—now they are all absent. They've

put up some kind of a job on Warlock. I'll swear they have. I can feel it in my bones as plainly as though it was rheumatiz. I wonder if this is some more of that Richards' work. Hang me, if it is, if I don't go down to the ranch and put a ball into his carcass, if a half a dozen wives was a-sittin' in the same room with him. Thar's no sich word as fizzle with me, and some of the fellers around this prairie will find it out afore I gets through."

The wear and tear on his system caused by the non-appearance of Brooks and his companions was so great that human nature could stand it no longer.

He put a brace of revolvers in his belt, seized his rifle, and, quitting the tavern, he set out across the prairie in the direction of a small patch of forest.

This romantic spot was a favorite resort of Warlock's, and Brooks knew that fact well.

He was sure that they would not attack him again upon the prairie for their previous experience had aroused their superstitious feelings.

Toward the forest then Barry quickly but carefully sped, trailing his rifle, which was taller than himself.

When he reached the woods he searched around upon the ground for some signs that would give him a trace of those whom he was in search of.

An old Indian fighter, a skillful hunter, and a scout of unsurpassable reliability, he was exactly the individual to find the tracks of Brooks and his gang, if such a thing was to be found at all.

Suddenly he halted and gave utterance to a cry of joy.

"Yes, thar they is," said Jack, as he gazed upon the footprints. "They're fresh; not many hours old; and there were a number of them, too. I was keyrect. Them fellers are here to ambuscade Warlock again. They are determined to kill him, and I'm afraid they'll succeed at last."

The thought seemed to depress the spirits of Barry for a time.

Then his eyes began to sparkle, and he clenched his rifle tighter, as he muttered between his teeth:

"But if they do succeed thar will be five other new-made graves on the edge of the prairie, and Bill Brooks' will be the first one."

He advanced slowly and cautiously, as noiselessly as a snake, and as agile as a cat.

Before he had proceeded far he discovered them.

They were all together, concealed behind a rock that covered the trail which led to the prairie.

"The sneakin' villains!" muttered Barry, as he gazed contemptuously at them. "Five ag'in one, and such a cowardly crowd, too. Why don't they come out and face him and give him a chance for his life? But I'll beat them yet. I'll circumvent them if I can. I'll flank 'em—get on t'other side of the woods, intercept Warlock, and put him on his guard."

He left them, and actually crawled away in the desired direction.

It required a great effort on his part to do it, however.

His fingers toyed nervously with his rifle, and his heart ached to draw a bead on them.

He reached the other side of the woods without being discovered, and concealing himself behind a tree near the trail, he waited patiently for his friend to appear.

"If he deviates an inch from the trail, he's a dead coon," said Barry, as he watched for Warlock's coming. "Suppose he does, and they kill him in my hearing, what will I do?

"What will I do?" he repeated, as a flush of excitement passed over his face. "I'll kill them in their tracks, and leave their dead bodies here to keep him company. I'm king—I'm cock of the walk; there's no such thing as fizzle with me!"

He dropped his rifle, drew his revolver, and jumped four feet into the air.

If his jump had been measured, it would have been found to be exactly the height of his bar.

He heard a faint noise in the woods, and he seized his rifle and listened intently.

It was a human footstep, and it was approaching him in the direction that he expected his friend to come.

In a few minutes Warlock appeared.

He was afoot. His revolvers and knives were in his belt, and his rifle was in his hand.

When he reached the tree behind which Barry was concealed, that individual jumped out and confronted him.

Warlock staggered back in surprise. What did it mean?

"Hush! Don't speak above a whisper!" said Barry, in a low voice.

"What's in the wind, Jack? What are you doing away from the tavern at this hour of the day? Has your boss let you off for a day's huntin', or have you retired from business with a fortune? Spit it out, Jack, spit it out!"

"Tongues only can tell, Warlock, but eyes can see. Follow me like we used to follow Injin trails years ago, afore the population got so thick hereabouts. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes and your ears open. This way, my covey. This way."

Overcome with surprise, Warlock followed the lead of Barry.

He led him through the woods to a point about midway from where they met on the edge of the prairie.

Then they halted, and Jack pointed with his finger directly in front of him.

Warlock looked in the direction indicated, and saw

Brooks and his gang eagerly watching over the top of the rock behind which they were concealed.

"What's the meaning of this, Jack?" inquired Warlock, as he failed at once to comprehend the object the men had in view. "Are they out for a hunt, too? Let's join them."

"Not so fast. Halt, and listen to me. They're out for a hunt, but they are huntin' for a life."

"A life, Jack? Are they lying in wait to fix me?"

"Sartain, Warlock; you've hit it exactly, and, if they got a chance to pop at yer, they would have put as many leaks in yer carcass as there is in a Dutchman's tea kettle."

"They want a funeral, do they, Jack? Well, we won't disappoint 'em. I'll take Bill Brooks, and you take Jake Brown thar, and we'll draw bead on 'em. Are you ready? Fire!"

They pulled the triggers of the rifles, and but one report followed.

Jake Brown, with a wild yell, fell.

Warlock's rifle had missed fire.

Bill Brooks, with a howl of rage, jumped to his feet, and bounded over the rock, followed by his companions.

"Blast the gun—I never knowed it to miss fire before," said Warlock; "and I never wanted it to go off so earnestly in my life."

A shot, fired by some one behind the rock, whizzed past the ear of Warlock and compelled him to draw closer under cover.

"Thar's four ag'in one," said Barry; "and the four cowardly sneaks is afraid to come out and meet us in honest, open warfare. If they didn't have them long-range rifles, I'd charged that rock thar, revolver in hand, carry it by assault, and make the sneakin' villains surrender. But as it is, those little shootin'-irons that is so valuable in a barroom is of no consequence here. We must fall back. We must get into the grass of the prairies. Hang 'em, if they follow us thar, we can play p'ints on 'em."

"Hold on a trifle, Jack," said Warlock, who had put a fresh cartridge into his rifle; "let me take another pop at 'em. Thar's a hat stickin' up above the rock, and thar's a head in it, you can bet. I wonder if it contains Bill Brooks' brain. If the fellow would raise a trifle I could easily rid him of all future trouble in this world, but he won't, and we can't stay here. They may flank us. I'll spile the hat, anyhow."

He leveled his piece, aimed carefully, and fired.

The ball struck the mark and carried the hat away beyond the reach of its owner.

"That's scared 'em a bit, and made 'em nervous. Now, let's get back to the prairie. Keep well under cover, Warlock, and don't give 'em a chance. They won't come out. Let me try 'em once more. I'm king—I'm cock of the walk. No, it's no use, they won't show themselves, and we can't stay here."

They reached the prairie in safety, concealed themselves in the tall grass, and waited in the hope that the others might appear.

The two men were full of fight, and wanted to have it out, but Bill Brooks and his companions were too cunning to be outwitted in that way.

They had already left the little patch of woods and entered the prairie from the opposite side to that in which Warlock and Jack Barry were lying in wait.

"It's hard to catch weasels asleep," said Warlock. "They've seen through our plan, and have eluded us. It's no use remaining here. Let's go."

They had not gone far before Barry missed his companion. He called him by name, but got no response.

"Some more of that phantom business," said Jack, as he resumed his journey alone.

"I've never said anything to Warlock about the matter, but I intend to some day. It's mysterious, to say the least. How in thunder does he manage it?"

Jack Barry reached the tavern, and went behind the bar at once.

There were a number of trappers assembled outside of the place, awaiting his arrival, and their impatient gestures and remarks of disapproval indicated that Jack's neglect of his business lately did not please them.

Among the number were Bill Brooks and his companions.

When the doors were opened, the thirty trappers rushed in and formed in line in front of the bar.

"There are some sneaks in this place," said Barry, as he jumped on top of the counter—"there are some sneaks in this place that have got no business among honest men. They are cowards who lie in wait, nearly half a dozen of 'em, to shoot one man. I'm a shootin' man. I'm sick of the work; I want them sneakin' vagabonds to vamoose this tavern, and never put their noses in here ag'in. I don't want to mention any names, but if Bill Brooks and his crowd don't turn their backs on this shebang in two minutes there will be several funerals in the neighborhood."

Brooks and his followers were alarmed by these threats, accompanied as they were by a revolver which Barry swung around in an ominous manner.

They turned away and left the place, muttering threats of vengeance.

CHAPTER V.

THE STORY OF A WRONG.

It was late that night when Jack Barry closed his tavern and sat down in a chair to rest himself, and to ruminate on the events of the day.

He had not been seated long before a loud rap on the door caused him to jump to his feet.

"Who's there?"

"It's me."

"Who are you?"

"Warlock. Open the door, Jack, and let me in."

"I did not recognize your voice, Warlock," said Jack, as the other entered the place. "Sit down."

"Thank you, Jack, I will. Them fellers came near clipping me to-day in the woods. How did you happen to get there?"

"They didn't turn up here, and I surmised something was crooked. So I shut up the shebang, went out on a scout, got on their trail, and surprised 'em."

"Do you think Richards put that job up, too?"

"I know he didn't."

"How do you know?"

"I heard Brooks telling the rest of the gang that the colonel refused to have any more to do with him. That if he had to fight you he would do it alone. They thought I was down the cellar, but I was standin' on the ladder, listenin' to every word they said."

"It's well for him he didn't have a hand in it, Jack. I came here to-night to settle the score with him, but if he was out of it, why, I'll get back to my crib and take some sleep."

"You have an old grudge ag'in the colonel, eh, Warlock?"

"I have."

"I thought so. I never saw him before in these parts. Have you?"

"Never."

"Oh! I understand you, then. It dates farther back?"

"Back to my boyhood days."

"Then it's a family matter, perhaps, and I have no right to say anything farther. But I'm yer friend, Warlock, and I'm a-goin' to stick by yer in thick and thin."

"I know that, Jack, and I thank you. You are my friend, for you have proved it, and as a friend, I'll tell you all. Give me a horn."

Barry procured the whisky, and Warlock swallowed it at a single gulp.

Then the Phantom threw his cup aside, laid his rifle on the floor at his feet, and after taking a large chew of tobacco, he began his story:

"My father, Jack, was as good a man as ever breathed the breath of life. He loved his children, and they idolized him; but that's neither here nor there.

"He was in business in a certain western city, and was doing well, laying by every year a snug little sum to draw on when the old day came that rendered him unable to work.

"You see, Jack, he was always considering us, and he did not want to be a tax on us as we grew up.

"One day a man with a military aspect entered his office and offered him a considerable sum for a share in the business. The offer was a tempting one, and was accepted, and the new partner stepped in.

"Before the year was gone things began to look blue. The capital of the concern began to dwindle away, and ruin stared them in the face.

"Then my father, who prized his name above anything else, began to draw upon his savings to save himself from bankruptcy.

"His money disappeared like bubbles down the rapids.

"Then he sold his house and put the proceeds into the business, and that was swallowed up, too.

"Then the crash that could no longer be avoided came.

"The firm failed.

"The cause of the failure was then ascertained. The new partner, who was the financial man of the concern, had used the funds in private speculation.

"When my father heard this news, he approached his partner, denounced him, seized him by the throat and put a pistol to his head.

"He had been ruined in his business, and his fair name had been tarnished by this man.

"He determined to kill him.

"Heaven interposed and prevented him from becoming a murderer.

"The excitement of the moment caused the blood to rush to his head—he burst a blood-vessel and died on the spot.

"He had but two children—my sister and myself.

"My mother struggled along, endeavoring to keep us together, but boy as I was, my proud spirit would not permit me to remain a dependent.

"I tried to get work, but I failed. Then I turned my back upon my old home and came West, determined to grow with the country, and if I was successful to bring them here.

"I did not succeed, and I have never risen above the grade of a trapper and scout.

"I received news of my sister's death, and afterwards word reached me that my mother was dead also.

"I was alone in the world.

"I never met the man who had brought this ruin upon my family since that time until a few days ago when I entered this room.

"I saw a stranger here, but time has worked such changes in his personal appearance that I failed to recognize him.

"Bill Brooks proposed to drink his health, and when he mentioned the name I listened to the name of the man who had brought ruin upon our family."

"You mean Colonel Richards?"

"Yes, Jack, Colonel Richards. He does not know who I am, and I wish to keep my identity concealed from him. He will never suspect who I am, for Warlock is not my name."

"We'll make him disgorge, Warlock. We'll make him refund. He's got plenty of money now, and, by thunder, if he don't settle with you he'll have to settle with me."

"Money sticks to the fingers of such people, Jack, and they learn to love it so that they never let go. It's no use trying it on. It won't work. I've got a better plan. I did intend to kill him, but I've changed my plan. He shall live."

"But you ain't safe, Warlock, while he lives. You better take my advice and give him a pill or a knife and be done with it."

"No, Jack. There's a sweeter revenge than that. I am going to kill him through his affections. He's a boy there livin' on the ranch with him that he loves better than he does himself. There's where my work will be done. If that boy disappears so that his fate is never known thereafter, what becomes of the colonel? Why, he'll fret and pine and pass anxious days and sleepless nights. He won't be able to eat. He'll go wanderin' around in the woods, turnin' over dry leaves lookin' for his lost boy. You'll see him runnin' over the prairie calling for his lost one to come back."

"But he won't come back, Warlock, will he?" inquired Jack, with a malicious grin.

"Does the past ever come back again? No, he'll never come back, Jack. Then his father will waste away and die by inches, and I shall see him every day growing thinner and more worn, until he sinks into the grave that he dug for himself. There's a revenge, Jack, that's a noble one, and that's the revenge that I shall take afore I say quits with Colonel Richards. He has aroused the wildest passions of my nature, and now let him look to himself. What time has it got to be?"

"After midnight. Yer better stay here and bunk in with me."

"Well, if you wishes it so, Jack, I will. I feel the want of company to-night, and when I've got you to talk to, it keeps the blue dents out of my heart. I'm thankful for your invitation, and I will stop here to-night."

Jack brought out a couple of heavy blankets, stretched them upon the floor of the barroom, and they laid down upon them.

Tired, and nearly overcome with fatigue, it was not long before they were sound asleep, and their stertorous breathing could be distinctly heard on the outside of the house.

There were four men listening there, and the heavy snoring from within pleased them immensely.

"He ordered us out of the place," said Brooks, "as though we were dogs, before the whole room. That's a score that's got to be settled. Have you got them pine knots?"

"Here they are, Bill," replied one of his companions, "piled up ag'in the door. When we start them a-burnin' they'll run up among the clapboards of that old shanty like a hurricane. Shall I touch 'em off?"

"Yes; start them off. Put a match to them, and then stand ready to shoot Jack Barry if he escapes the flames. Here. Give me the match. I'm the man that stands entitled to that right."

Brooks seized the match and ignited the pine knots.

In a moment the blaze shot up, licked the pine door, up along the wooden building to the roof.

The smoke was dense, and it curled up in volumes.

Warlock was awakened by a suffocating sensation, and he jumped to his feet and aroused his sleeping companion.

"Blazes!" exclaimed Jack. "The place is afire, Warlock. Let us get out. Break open that door."

Warlock seized the door and broke it from its hinges.

The flames worked in upon them. Barry, seeing that help was impossible in that direction, lifted the door from the floor, where his companion had thrown it, and braced it again in its old place.

"Get up the ladders and get out on the roof, Warlock. Follow me. This way."

The smoke was now so dense that it was with difficulty that the inmates could breathe.

They could not see each other, and they were guided by each other's voices.

They reached the ladder and ascended it.

They burst open the scuttle and got upon the top of the house.

Although the smoke was dense, they were seen by those who were watching the devouring element from the outside.

A number of pistol shots alarmed them, and they retreated hastily inside the house again.

"We're gone, Jack," said Warlock. "It's all up with us. Let us force our way through the flames, and sell our lives as dearly as possible. I will not stay cooped up in here, and die like a dog."

"I'll beat them, Warlock. I am prepared for this. Do yer think, when I built this house, that I didn't know the people I was livin' amongst? Leave me alone for that. Get down the cellar. Give me your hand. This way. Here's the ladder. Now get down."

They descended to the cellar.

Barry went ahead, and Warlock followed him.

They reached a kind of a lane that had been excavated in the earth, and they groped their way through.

When they got to the end of it, they climbed up a slight ascent, until they reached the roof.

Here Jack lifted a stone, and they both passed out safely upon the surface.

They were in the rear of the burning building.

A thick growth of bushes concealed them, but by the light of the fire they could see the faces of the incendiaries.

"It's Bill Brooks and his crowd, and they are getting square because I ordered them out of the house to-day," said Barry.

"Let's give them a dose of lead," suggested Warlock.

"A dose of lead!" replied Barry, with a hoarse laugh. "A dose of lead. Why, man, we are unarmed. Our rifles and pistols are in the house. If they see us, we will be killed where we stand."

"Then we must give leg-bail, Jack. Let us get into the prairie grass. They have burned your house over your head. Now you must come and pass the rest of the night with me."

Jack shuddered. The mystery attending the Prairie Phantom had affected him to a greater degree than he was willing to admit.

He hesitated, but Warlock settled the matter by seizing him by the arm and leading him away.

CHAPTER VI.

TREACHEROUS FRIENDS.

It was near daylight before Brooks and his companions left the burning building.

Every timber that it contained had by this time been reduced to ashes.

The cellar was filled with the debris, and as the trappers gazed into the smoking ruins a fiendish smile appeared upon their faces.

"We were in luck to-night, boys," said Brooks. "We came here to revenge ourselves on Jack Barry, and we wiped out Warlock at the same time. I saw him on the roof with Jack. We've finished those two, and now we must skip from the neighborhood. We'll move for the West, boys. That's the advantage of our business. A trapper here is a good trapper anywhere."

"We ought to have some money, Bill. I'd sooner go without sleep than without money. We must make a strike somewhere before we leave. It makes no difference whether it is friend or foe that suffers, inasmuch as we shall never return here."

"You are right," replied Brooks, "and we must make a raise somewhere. But the question is where?"

"Colonel Richards must have a pile of money somewhere," said one. "He didn't come here empty handed, and lately he has assumed a great deal of importance and keeps aloof from us. He was glad enough at one time to avail himself of our assistance."

"That's the cheese, exactly," added another. "We've all been in his house awaiting an attack from Warlock, and we know every room it contains. It's night, and we can get there before daylight if we move at once. There are four of us, and it won't take us long to use up Richards."

"Use up Richards," replied Brooks. "Why, he is not at home. He went East yesterday afternoon with his wife to be gone two days. There are now but two persons in the house—the colonel's son and that young lady they call Tillie. We've got a sure thing there, boys. We'll rob the place and get West at once. Come on."

They turned their backs upon the smoldering ruins of Jack Barry's tavern, and, with a chuckle, they started away at a brisk walk.

The moon was in its last quarter, and as they halted near the house of the colonel to hold a consultation, it shone brightly upon their scowling, villainous faces.

"We must divide our forces, and force both the front and rear doors at once," suggested Brooks. "We can't tell what opposition we might meet with, and we better be prepared for it. Look to your pistols, boys, and see that they are all right."

They drew their revolvers from their belts, and after carefully examining them, put them back in their places.

While they were advancing, and while they were thus assembled for consultation on the roadside, the anxious face of Tillie watched them from the window of Colonel Richards' house.

As the lights within the house were all extinguished, the trappers failed to discover her.

She saw them approach the house, and she recognized the well-known faces of Brooks and his companions.

At first she supposed that they had visited the place to satisfy themselves of its safety, and of the security of the inmates, but when she saw their heads drawn together in silent conclave, she became alarmed.

She watched them intently, and when they drew their revolvers from their belts and examined them, she was convinced that their visit to the house was for no good object.

"I must call Harry Richards," said Tillie. "They have come here to rob and perhaps murder us," to herself. "The cowards. They know that the colonel is away. If he was at home they would not have dared to come here for such a purpose."

She went into the room where Harry slept, and awoke him.

"Come, Harry. We're in danger. Bill Brooks and his gang are coming this way, and I fear they intend to attack the house."

"Do you think so, Tillie? But they are our friends."

"They are our enemies now, Harry. I've watched them from the window, and no friends would act as they have done. I could not sleep from anxiety, and I went to the window and saw them gazing out upon the moonlit prairies, when they appeared. Hurry—hurry, I can hear their voices. Bring your rifle. I shall hold them at bay until you arrive."

She ran to the front window and cautiously gazed forth.

They had again halted, and after dividing their forces, they again advanced to the house.

"Oh!" said Tillie, as she saw the movement. "Now we'll repulse them. What an amateur in the art of war the leader of that gang is! How the colonel would laugh if he were here! Why, even I know how dangerous it is to divide an army. They're both to be beaten in detail, and we shall beat them."

She seized a rifle that stood near, carefully raised the window, and assuming a deep masculine voice, the better to deceive those below, she called out:

"Halt! What do you want here? About face and fall back at once, or I'll open fire."

By this time Harry stood by her side, armed with a rifle also.

"They have divided forces, Harry," whispered Tillie. "Get to the back window and defend that part of the household; I'll attend to this. The cowards! The colonel did not misjudge the character of these fellows when we cut loose from them."

"All right, Tillie; I'll go, then, at once. But be careful, girl, and do not expose yourself unnecessarily. Remember we have rifles, and they are armed with only pistols. We must keep them from getting within close range. If we accomplish that their weapons will be useless, and we can pick them off."

"Like gooseberries off a huckleberry bush," replied Tillie, laughing. "Get to your post, Harry."

"By thunder, we've been discovered," said Brooks, who, with another of the gang, was to force the front door. "That's a bad deal for us. What are we to do now?"

"Make a show of fighting, and keep their attention attracted this way while the other fellows get in through the back door and overwhelm them, Bill. That's the way to fix the job."

"True as Gospel, and a good plan, too. But I say, me boy, I don't recognize the voice that challenged us. It was a man's and, from the language, a military man's, too. I wonder if the colonel has been and gone and smuggled a few of his military companions into the house to guard it when he was away?"

"Shouldn't be surprised at anything he might do, Bill. He's mean enough to put up a job like that."

"Well, let us give them a couple of shots. We are out of range, and can't hit anything, but we can keep their eyes this way and keep them busy like," said Brooks.

They drew their revolvers and fired one shot each.

"Halloo! what do you think of your friends now, Harry?" inquired Tillie, as she called to her companion, who was in an adjoining room.

"That you are right, Tillie. They are treacherous, and I will hunt them if I can."

"I'm going to fire, Harry. They're getting too close for comfort; I must keep them off."

Tillie took deliberate aim and fired.

She was not an expert in the use of the rifle, although she had fired many a one.

She rested the long barrel upon the window-sill, and when she pulled the trigger, and watched the effect of the shot, she saw the two fellows dodge and drop upon the ground.

"This won't do, Bill," said one. "That ball nearly took my ear off. I'm not goin' to stand here and be made a target of. By thunder, the next one may go through me."

"It was too close to be comfortable, you are right. Let's get under cover. Get behind this tree, and we'll blaze away again. One thing is certain, we're as close to the colonel's house as we can get, for if we made the attempt, we should be shot down before we got there. Blaze away ag'in, and keep 'em busy on this side till the other fellows get in; then we'll make that fellow, whoever he is, sweat for this night's work."

They ran to the cover afforded by a large tree, and fired again.

They had no sooner reached there than another rifle-shot was heard.

"The jig is up, Brooks. Did you hear that shot fired?"

"Of course I did, and it came from the back of the house; our fellows have been seen. Hang me if they haven't beat a retreat, and they're comin' this way. It was a good move, though. Why didn't you obey orders?" cried Brooks, angrily, addressing the newcomer.

"Why don't you obey orders, too, Bill Brooks?" replied one of the gang. "We tried to reach the house, but the music of a bullet started us back on a run. What are you talkin' about?"

"Well, it's all for the best," said Bill, "and I tell you what we'll do. We must concentrate and assault the house. Some of us may fall, but we will be sure to succeed if we determine upon it. Are you agreed? I'll lead you."

"And we'll follow you, Bill," replied the others.

"There's plenty of the needful in that house, boys," said Brooks, in order to encourage his companions to increased efforts, "and if we once get our claws upon it, there won't be any need of us doin' any trappin' or scout-

in' ag'in in this world. Are you ready, men, to follow me?"

"We are, Bill. Lead on."

They all answered but one. He stood with wild-looking eyes gazing across the prairie.

"What in thunder are you lookin' at?" inquired Brooks, as he looked upon the man in surprise.

"I know you won't believe me, Bill, but I'll swear I saw a man riding at break-neck speed across the prairie on a black horse. While I watched him he disappeared."

His companions laughed derisively.

"You can all laugh," resumed the trapper, "but seeing is believing. The moonlight is bright yet, and I saw him as distinctly as I see any of you now."

"Oh, it won't do," said Brooks. "That Prairie Phantom business is played out. We burnt Warlock to a cinder in Barry's tavern, and if you go back there and dig you'll find his charred bones in the ruins."

"Look—look! There it is again," exclaimed the trapper. "It seemed to rise out of the ground. There's two of them now on the horse, and they're riding this way."

"You are right," said Brooks, in a hoarse voice. "It's the Phantom sure enough. But who's that behind him on the horse? He's smaller than Warlock, and he's got broader shoulders."

"It's Jack Barry," exclaimed another.

"So it is," cried Brooks, as he watched them riding wildly across the prairie in the moonlight. "We sent them out of the world in a blaze of glory, and why don't they rest contented in their graves?"

"That's just where the trouble comes in," said a trapper in a low, tremulous voice. "They didn't have any graves to rest in, and they is out to-night seekin' for new made ones. Can't yer see that they is facin' toward the village church-yard?"

"So they are—so they are! They are facing west. This beats me completely, boys. I can face the livin' but hang me if I can fight with departed spirits. Come, boys, we'll turn our faces toward the east, and meet the sun. That kills them supernatural beings. Daylight wipes 'em out. And Jack Barry, too? Two phantoms now, boys. This is gettin' worse and worse."

Thus soliloquizing, and addressing his companions alternately, Bill Brooks led the way toward the rising sun, taking good care to keep well concealed by the tall grass of the prairie.

"They're flying, Harry!" exclaimed Tillie to the youth who stood by her side. "The cowards are flying!"

"They are evidently afraid of those men coming across the prairie, Tillie."

"Who are they?"

"One is Wild Warlock."

"The fiend who attacked this house and fired the barn? Who is the other?"

"Jack Barry."

"His companion on that night. They are both desperate characters, Harry, and if they come this way I'm afraid we will not be able to defend the house."

"But they are not coming this way, Tillie. They are going toward the village."

"Then we are safe for the present, Harry. The farm hands will be here at daybreak, and then you can go to the village and secure protection."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRE ON THE PRAIRIE.

The farm hands arrived in proper season at the ranch, and after partaking of a slight breakfast, Harry mounted his pony and started for the settlement.

The attack upon the house the night before by Bill Brooks and his gang of outlaws, had awakened the anxiety of Harry for the safety of his father's property.

The colonel's absence, too, was a source of considerable worry to the boy, for he feared that he might be waylaid on his return home and murdered.

The first thing of any note that attracted his attention after he had well advanced upon his journey was the smoldering ruins of Jack Barry's tavern.

It was the first news he had of the affair, and while it excited his surprise, it also to a certain extent relieved his mind.

The cause of the appearance of Warlock and Jack Barry riding across the prairie at that early hour was now fully explained.

Jack was undoubtedly going for lumber to rebuild the tavern.

As Harry stood watching the ruins he observed that the fire had been slowly communicated by means of the brushwood in which it had smoldered during the night to the edges of the prairie grass.

It was burning briskly and beyond the power of the boy to extinguish it.

He had often read of a prairie fire, but had never seen one, and momentarily carried away by the excitement of the moment, he left the road and spurred his horse into the prairie, so that he could enjoy a better view of the flames as they leaped along.

The scene was full of enchantment to his young mind, and he could not suppress his emotions as he viewed it.

It soon began to assume formidable proportions, however, and for safety's sake he concluded to return to the road.

He spurred his horse forward, but the terror of the animal had been aroused, and now thoroughly frightened, he refused to obey the commands of his rider.

In a few minutes the flames had increased to such an extent that escape by the road was impossible.

The flames had begun to roam, and almost before Harry could realize the fact he was almost surrounded by fire.

There had been a gentle breeze blowing when the fire started, but it had now increased, under the influence of the heat, to a gale.

The fire began to spread across the prairie with frightful speed.

There was but one thing for the boy to do. He must turn his horse and flee before it.

The animal now, instead of being terrorized by the fire, was fascinated with it, and it was with the greatest difficulty that his rider succeeded in turning his head in an opposite direction.

When he accomplished this difficult feat, the fire had nearly reached the spot where they stood.

Driving his spurs into the pony up to the heels, and yelling like a wild Indian, Harry started the pony on a mad gallop across the broad expanse of prairie.

Urge his steed as he would, he did not seem to increase the distance between himself and his fiery foe.

Occasionally the pony became fractious, danced around on his hind legs, and seemed determined to rush toward the devouring flames.

Each time Harry succeeded in subduing his rebellious spirit, until they got nearly midway between the spot where Jack Barry's tavern once stood and the little patch of woods.

Then the pony turned abruptly, and dashed toward the approaching flames.

When Harry turned him in the opposite direction the animal resented and insisted upon galloping the other way.

The raging, roaring flame was rapidly approaching, and still the pony refused to quit the spot.

The heat was already intense, and it was with difficulty that the boy could breathe.

His safety depended upon forcing his pony to resume his journey, as his rider desired, for the boy well knew that if he abandoned the animal and attempted to escape by running he would be overtaken by the flames and perish.

Still the pony struggled; the flames were within a few yards of him; and, nearly overcome with faintness, caused by the stifling atmosphere and his exertions, Harry was on the point of falling from the horse.

Then he heard a loud, commanding voice.

He raised his head and gazed in wonderment at a man who stood before him.

It was Wild Warlock, the Prairie Phantom.

He had seized the pony by the nostrils with one hand, while with the other he threw a handkerchief around the animal's eyes, so as to prevent him from seeing the flames.

Warlock's horse stood near.

"Now try him, boy," exclaimed Warlock, after he had blindfolded the pony's eyes.

The boy dug his spurs into the horse, but he was as obstinate as ever.

"I cannot budge him, sir," said Harry, in despair.

"Then leave him to his fate, boy. Come with me," said Warlock.

He seized the boy as though he were a baby, lifted him from the pony, and placed him on his own horse.

Then he mounted the animal himself and started away like the wind.

As Harry glanced around he saw his favorite pony give a wild bound and jump forward.

With a deep-drawn sigh the boy closed his eyes and turned his face away.

He did not wish to witness the animal's death agonies.

"My father will reward you well for this, Warlock," said Harry, as they rode along.

"Well, I wasn't seekin' a reward, boy," replied Warlock. "I suppose a man may do his duty without being paid for it with so much gold. But you are young, and you don't yet know the value of words. You spoke of your father. Who is he?"

"Colonel Richards."

"Colonel Richards," muttered Warlock between his clenched teeth. "This is his son, then. This is the boy I was seeking in order to carry out my vengeance against the colonel. He is in my power now, and I will make the cheeks of this robber of my father blanch with fear and his heart ache with anxiety before I get through with him. This was a lucky blow, indeed."

When they reached a certain point in the prairie Warlock stopped his horse, and turning to the boy he said, sternly:

"Dismount."

"Dismount here," replied Harry. "Why, I will be burned to death if I do. You don't mean that, sir!"

"Dismount at once or I'll throw you from the horse."

Harry jumped off without further delay. There was a commanding tone in the language that was not to be misinterpreted.

When he saw that the boy had reached the ground, Warlock jumped from the horse, and struck the animal with the flat of his hand.

The next moment the horse was flying across the prairie towards the patch of woods.

"Now follow me, boy," said Warlock.

The Phantom walked a few steps and halted by the side of a large flat stone.

He stooped and lifted it.

A large opening in the earth stood exposed to view.

A rustic ladder which was secured to the side of the earth led to a subterranean cavern.

"Descend," said Warlock.

Harry turned pale. The stern manner of the speaker alarmed him, but he was powerless, and it would have been folly to resist.

Once he was tempted to fly, but as he looked toward the burning prairie the thought faded from his mind. Such an attempt would be suicidal.

The boy descended into the cavern.

Warlock followed, replaced the stone carefully to conceal the opening, lighted a torch, and led the boy into a large chamber.

There was a rush of waters heard, and as Harry followed the sound he saw an opening about two feet square in the floor of the cavern.

Warlock saw him gazing upon it.

"That's a subterranean river, boy. Keep clear of that hole if you value your existence, for if you should tumble in there you would be carried into eternity in an instant."

The fire was now passing over their heads, and they could hear its wild roar above them.

"We will not be suffocated here?" inquired Harry.

"No, boy; I've often been here during a prairie fire. We are as safe as though we were on the ocean. The water that passes through here gives us more than all the air we need."

"Shall we go out when the fire passes us, sir?"

"No; you will remain here."

"But my father does not know where I am, Warlock. I must go to him, for he will be anxious."

A sinister smile passed over the features of the Phantom.

"You will remain here."

"Am I a prisoner, then?"

"You are."

"What have I done, sir?"

"You, nothing. Your father, everything. Now, I want to be questioned no further. Do as I bid you, and all will go well. Disobey my orders and I shall cast you into the river. Now, listen."

The boy's heart throbbed with anguish, and he gazed with fear into the face of Wild Warlock.

"Whenever I quit this cavern I will secure you with thongs. Where I place you there you will remain until I return. During that time you must remain speechless, for if I discover that you utter a sound, I shall revenge myself upon you at once. You have heard me, now look to yourself."

Harry gazed into the stern and relentless face of Warlock.

It seemed so merciless that the appeal for mercy that he intended to make to him remained unsaid.

There was nothing for him to do but to comply with the orders of the Phantom and abide his time.

Hours passed by. Warlock produced some food and invited the boy to partake of it, but he could not eat.

It seemed an age to Harry before Warlock lifted the stone and looked out, but he did at last.

The fire was smoldering some miles away, but, at the cavern the fire was not only out, but the earth was comparatively cool.

As the stone was raised, Harry gazed intently toward the opening and his heart sank within his bosom.

It was night.

Warlock descended and accosted the boy.

"Now, I'm going out and I'm going to tie you. You stay where I put you until I get back. No tricks now. Do you hear?"

He tied the boy's ankles together with strong cords. Then he secured his wrists in a similar manner.

This done he led him into a kind of alcove where some dried leaves were scattered upon the floor.

"There, boy, you can lie down and sleep. I'll try you without the gag to-night. If you keep silent I will not use it, but if you should drive me to put it in your mouth you'll wish yourself dead. Now I'm off."

He ascended the rustic ladder, taking care first to extinguish the torch, and leaving the place in darkness.

He lifted the stone, reached the prairie, and carefully replaced the slab.

When he had gone Harry groaned in anguish.

"I see through this now," he exclaimed. "This Wild Warlock will attack my father's house to-night. They know the colonel is absent from home, and they must know that Tillie will be there to-night. What can one poor girl brave as she is, do again such desperate villains? Nothing. She will be murdered. And as for me, what will be my fate? If they rob the house they will not return here again, but will leave me here to die of slow starvation! Oh! what a sad fate would that be!"

He buried his face in the dried leaves, and wept with all the bitterness of his soul.

CHAPTER VIII.

MEETING UNEXPECTED FRIENDS.

At the ranch of Colonel Richards Tillie watched patiently for the return of Harry.

Night came at last, and when the farm hands had gone and she was left alone in the house, she began to grow uneasy.

Ten o'clock arrived and although the girl watched by the window he did not appear.

Then she regretted that she did not detain some of the laborers who worked upon the ranch until morning, but she was so confident of the boy's safe return that she did not consider it necessary.

Now they had departed and she was alone in the big house.

The loneliness of the place was terrible. If she had some one to speak to it would have been a great relief to her overcharged brain.

She had prepared the supper for two persons, but she did not taste the food. She had no appetite.

Then she began to recall her terrible experience of the night previous, when Bill Brooks and his rascally gang had attacked the house.

Suppose they should renew the attack that night.

They must be possessed of the knowledge that she was alone in the house, for they could not have failed to discover that Harry Richards had gone away that morning, and had not returned.

Perhaps they had waylaid and murdered him.

Her face turned a shade paler as the thought flashed across her brain.

"If they have," muttered Tillie, "they will be here to-night. Let them come. I will avenge him, and I will defend myself to the last. If I have to die they shall die with me."

She seized the candle and descended to the floor below.

Then she carefully locked and barred the door, and returned again to her room upstairs.

From her chamber she had an extensive view of the surrounding country, and was enabled readily to discover the approach of any one.

She picked up the rifles and stood them near the front window, within reach if she needed them.

She had a look of determination on her face that boded evil to those who attempted to interfere with her.

"Now for the end," said Tillie. "Those villains shall never put their fingers upon me. I am not afraid to die, and rather than be captured by them I will sacrifice my life."

She went into Colonel Richards' room and brought a small keg.

It contained gunpowder.

She placed it in the hallway outside of the room.

"If they force an entrance into the house," said Tillie, "I will fire a ride into the gunpowder when they approach me. Thus my life will end, but so will theirs as well."

She went back, extinguished the light, and sat down by the window to watch.

She had not been seated there long before she discovered the faint outlines of two men creeping stealthily along on the edge of the prairie.

She jumped to her feet and grasped her rifle.

"There they are. They're coming. I thought the villains would return to-night. Now I am satisfied that harm has come to Harry Richards. But I will avenge him. Let them once get within range of my rifle, and I will send them to their final account."

She watched the two men intently as they cautiously approached the house.

They got within range and she opened the window noiselessly and fired.

The two men retreated hastily into the tall grass of the prairie, where they hid themselves.

Finding that, for the time being, she was secure from molestation on that side of the house, she hurried to the rear windows and intently scanned the surrounding country.

She feared that in renewing the attack they might adopt the tactics of the preceding night.

There was nothing to be seen in that direction.

She returned to watch by the front window, surprised at her failure to discover any one approaching by the way of the rear, and somewhat anxious to know what new plan of attack they might adopt.

While she thus sat in the dark room, the two men still remained concealed in the edge of the tall grass along the wood that had escaped the fire.

"Who fired that shot?" inquired Barry.

"Who? Why, the girl, of course. There's nobody in the house but her. I knew that, and that's what brought us here."

"Then you don't get me within range ag'in, Warlock. I don't fancy bullets when they come as close to my head as that did. Where in thunder is Bill Brooks? We came here to euchre him on this job, and he don't seem to turn up."

"He attacked this place last night, Jack, and was repulsed. I know that for certain. He is a cowardly dog, professin' to be friendly to the colonel, too, and then turning on him like that. If he comes here with his crowd to-night, we'll wipe 'em out clean and clear."

"If we could only get in the house we could manage them fellers better, Warlock. Why, hang it all, we could get the gal to go down and open the door for em' and then we could pepper 'em. Let's try it."

"It won't do, Jack. The moment we show our noses within range she'll open on us."

"Suppose we try a flag of truce?"

"Well, that's an idea; but what does women folks know about flags of truce? It's pretty risky, Jack."

"Risky or not, I'm a-goin' to try it. Why, we dare not poke our noses out here. Hang it all, if Brooks' crowd

should come along, and we got into a scrimmage with 'em, ten to one but what she'd open fire on us, when we've come here to defend her. As to flags of truce, if she's the colonel's darter she will know all about 'em."

"Well, Jack, go ahead. It won't do for me to show myself, you know, for the girl might recognize me as the person who set fire to the barn."

As Tillie sat by the window she saw one of the men arise from the shelter of the grass.

She took deliberate aim at him, and was about to pull the trigger, when she discovered something white fluttering at the end of his rifle.

"It is a flag of truce," said the girl, as she lowered her rifle. "What does all this mean? Is it a trick to get within range and shoot me? I'll fire if it is."

Jack Barry, with the white rag attached to his gun, slowly approached the house, until he heard a command, uttered in a stern voice, that compelled him to stop. It was the word:

"Halt!"

"You have got your gun at a 'shoulder' now, and do not move it at your peril," cried Tillie. "I have got you cornered with my rifle, and if you move the piece I will put a bullet in your heart. Now, what is it that you want?"

"I came here to tell yer, girl, that I'm Jack Barry. I'm king. I'm cock of the walk. Thar's no sich word as fizzle with me. Me and Wild Warlock came here to protect yer ag'in Bill Brooks, and you turns about and opens fire on us. We're friends of yours, we is, and we wants yer to know it."

"How do I know that you are my friends? Warlock fired the colonel's barn a few nights ago, and now he is here professing friendship."

"Things has changed since then, girl. Bill Brooks and his cowardly gang burned my shebang over my head and tried to burn me up with it. Ain't it enough for you to know that? We wants to get square on them fellers, and we came here to-night expectin' that they would come ag'in and attack yer, in which case me and Warlock was a-goin' to wipe 'em out. Ain't that enough for you? Yer don't suppose that I came here to help them fellers arter what they did to me, do yer?"

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I don't suppose yer cares to let us hide ourselves in the house, do yer?"

"Never. You cannot enter here."

"Then that being settled and understood, we wants yer not to fire on us. We won't come any nearer to you than we is, but if we wanders around thar a little to stretch our legs, don't yer get alarmed. Another thing; if them thar Brooks crowd should drift along and we pitches into them and you feels like takin' a hand in too, don't you go and shoot us instead of them. I'm through, girl."

"Then retire. About face. March. Don't take that rifle from your shoulder until you get back."

"She's a regular Amazon," muttered Barry, as he wheeled about and joined his companion.

"And she's sharp as a needle."

Tillie, although she succeeded in conveying such an impression to Barry, had no confidence in his assertions.

She sat on guard by the window all night long, and the first break of day found her there, wakeful and watchful.

Jack Barry and Warlock were still in their places, also, nor did they quit the spot until the farm hands appeared.

Then they turned their backs upon the Richards mansion, and slowly walked away, grievously disappointed that Bill Brooks had not put in an appearance.

They intended to return the following night and watch again, but before they had proceeded far, they saw Colonel Richards driving along the road—toward his house—course, under these circumstances such an act on their part became unnecessary.

Tillie met him at the door.

"You look pale and careworn, Tillie," said the colonel, as he tenderly kissed her. "Has anything occurred of serious moment since I went away?"

"Yes; Harry——"

"Harry? What has happened to him? Speak, Tillie. That something dreadful has occurred I can see from your face. Speak out, girl."

"He went forth yesterday morning on his pony to go to the village, and he has not returned."

"Has he not been seen, Tillie?"

"He was last seen crossing the prairie."

"My!" exclaimed the colonel, as he staggered into a chair. "Then he must have been caught by the fire and burned to death. Now I am childless—I am childless."

CHAPTER IX.

THE OLD INDIAN CHIEF.

Although Tillie related to the colonel the adventures of the two preceding nights, he appeared to be heedless of her words.

His whole mind was concentrated upon his missing son, and he was endeavoring to outline a plan of action so as to trace him.

After swallowing a hastily prepared breakfast, he mounted his horse, and started at a slow pace across the burnt prairie land.

If Harry had been caught in the flames and burned to death, his remains were then lying upon the prairie, and these must be secured.

As he rode along he scanned the ground closely.

Every burned piece of timber that he came across, every smoke-begrimed rock sent a chill to his heart.

Several times he dismounted from his horse to examine objects more minutely, but each time he was doomed to be disappointed.

As he rode slowly along two men approached him.

One was Jack Barry, and the other was Wild Warlock.

"I am looking for my son, gentlemen," said Richards, in a broken voice, as the tears trickled down his cheeks. "He was last seen crossing this prairie. I fear that he has been burned to death."

Warlock glanced under his eyelids at the pale face and the trembling limbs of the colonel, and a triumphant smile crossed his features.

"I have rent his heart," muttered Warlock. "I have filled his soul with agony, and now I am reaping my vengeance. My poor father's bones will rest in his grave when I get through. I shall make him put the poisoned chalice to his own lips and swallow the bitter draught. I never thought I should be able to wreak my vengeance, but now that I have the opportunity, I shall not let it slip through my fingers."

Warlock did not leave the colonel's side, but wandered with him across the prairie.

The intense suffering that was depicted on his face fascinated and charmed Warlock, and he clung to him like a wasp in pursuit of his enemy.

They reached the spot where the charred remains of a horse was lying.

With a scream of agony Richards jumped from his horse, stooped down, and carefully examined the remnant of harness that remained unconsumed.

"It's Harry's pony," gasped the colonel. "But where is the body of my boy? He never could have escaped afoot across this prairie with the fire pursuing him. It must be here somewhere."

He wandered around in a circle, but nothing was found.

Night came on and found him still engaged in the search, and with a heart filled with grief he reluctantly abandoned the search and slowly and sadly returned to his lonely home.

The next morning at daylight he started to resume the search.

As he crossed the road he espied an old Indian seated upon a log by the roadside.

As he approached the old warrior he arose from his seat and saluted the colonel.

He was aged almost to decrepitude, and as he stood upon his feet he trembled with the weight of his years, as though he was afflicted with palsy.

His bloodless face was as wrinkled as ground over which the furrow had just passed, while the scalp lock on the top of his head was as white as the snow.

When Richards reached the old Indian's side the aged warrior placed his hand on the colonel's shoulder to steady himself.

"These are my old hunting grounds, pale face, and I am Black Hand, who was once a great chief. My arm now is as helpless as that of a papoose, and my voice is as weak as a bird's."

"Sit down upon the log, chief," said Richards. "I see that you will talk with me, but your limbs are weak and cannot well support the weight that they needs must carry."

Thus pressed, Black Hand seated himself and resumed his talk.

"These were my old hunting grounds, pale face, and Black Hand was a great warrior. The white people, when they came here and tried to rob us of these fields and hills and mountain streams, knew how to fear my power. I fought them as a lion fights the hunter who trespasses upon his domain.

"I am truthful, you see, pale face. I asked not for mercy at their hands, and I gave none. It was war to the knife, and the scalps of our white enemies hung in our wigwams as thick as snow-flakes in winter. We fought them, but the white soldiers were better armed than the red man, and when we killed one it seemed as though two others took his place.

"We were subdued, and we had to leave the old hunting grounds. It was a sad day that we were marched from here. Every mountain stream, every hill top, and every valley was filled with our traditions. Here was the land of our fathers, and our fathers' fathers. We would rather have died than go; but we were overpowered, and we had to leave.

"From then until to-day I have not gazed upon this place; and the old, familiar landscape takes me back to the good old days of my childhood. We were sent to a reservation, and there I have since remained, until all my people died and left me alone—the last surviving warrior of my tribe.

"I wanted to see my old home before I died. I felt that my time was short, and I determined to come here before my limbs entirely failed me. Here I am. I feel better; but there is one place more that I desire to see before I return home again, though I fear that my strength is not sufficient to carry me there."

"My horse is at your disposal, chief," said Richards, considerably affected by the old Indian's story. "I can walk, for my limbs are younger and stronger than yours."

"As it is kindly offered, I accept it," said Black Hand. "You will please assist me to mount. There was a day when I needed no such help, but that time has passed away forever."

Richards assisted the old Indian to get upon the horse, and when he was comfortably seated the warrior said:

"About midway in the prairie, between where we stand and the small patch of woods that you see yonder growing in the very heart of the prairie itself, is a cavern. It is there I would go. It was my favorite resort during the summer when the breeze blew warm, and many an hour with my squaw and my papooses by my side have I loitered in its cooling shades.

"The opening on the top of the cavern is covered by a stone that I placed there myself. A ladder leads to the cave below, while underneath all flows a subterranean river bringing with its mournful chant refreshing winds from some mountain lake that we knew not of. I know the spot well, and if you will but lead the horse I will direct you how to go."

Richards seized the horse's bridle and slowly led him along, while the old warrior, carried away by the memory of his early life, broke forth into a solemn song.

It was the death song of his tribe.

They reached the spot where the remains of Harry's pony were lying, when, unable to control his feelings, Richards groaned with anguish.

The old chief stopped short in his chant, and gazed inquiringly into the face of the other.

"Your face is whiter than the snow, pale face," said Black Hand. "It is not the color that rises there from fear, for I know that well, but it comes from sorrow. What is it that weighs so heavily upon your heart? I am your friend, for you were kind to me, and old as I am perhaps I can assist you."

"My son was caught upon the prairie when the grass was burning," replied Richards in a low voice. "See, this is his pony, but I cannot find his body."

"Ah! Help me dismount," said Black Hand. "I can read the marks upon the ground as readily as a pale face can read his Bible. I may find some signs there to guide you."

The colonel seized the Indian, and in the excitement and hope which his words inspired, he lifted him from the saddle as though he had been but a child.

Black Hand stooped and examined the ground carefully.

For a time he remained silent, and during that period hope and despair alternately filled the heart of Richards.

At last the old chief arose to his feet, and began slowly to talk.

"Your boy did not perish here. These marks are two days old, but I can read them. They were made by your son's pony. But there are larger ones that were made by a full-grown horse at the same time."

"You think there is hope then, chief?" asked Richards, with a tremulous voice.

"Wait and you shall hear. There are other marks here as well. They are of the same age, for they were made at the same time. One is the footprints of a boy, and the other of a man. They lead from where the pony stood to where the larger horse stood, and there they are lost. Now what does this mean? It means that the boy abandoned his pony and with the man mounted the larger animal, and together they rode away."

"Oh, if you could but follow the trail, good Black Hand!" pleaded Richards.

"I'll try a little while at all events," said the Indian. "Let me rest upon your arm as I walk along. You can lead the horse. You see the trail is quite fresh, and I see it plainly. The point of the hoof leads in this direction, and we will follow it."

They traveled along slowly.

Several times the old warrior, whose sight was failing, lost the trail, but on all such occasions, by getting down upon his knees, and scrutinizing the ground carefully, he recovered it again.

At last they came to a spot where the Indian halted.

His face assumed a serious expression, and he seemed to be perplexed.

"They dismounted here, pale face, and yet the trail bothers me sorely. Here are the foot-prints of the boy and the man, side by side, while the hoof marks of the horse lead in a contrary direction. I do not understand this. One thing is certain, they and the horse parted company here."

They did not travel much farther before the Indian halted abruptly.

"The trail ends here, pale face. Where could they have gone? Surely the earth could not have opened and swallowed them?"

"Perhaps the cavern that you were seeking may be hereabouts," suggested Richards.

His voice sounded like the last despairing cry of a drowning man who sees no hope of rescue.

"You're right, pale face, you're right. I had quite forgotten about the cavern in my eagerness to follow the trail, as I have often done in times long past. The cavern is here."

"Where, Black Hand?" inquired Richards, with a wild cry.

"Here at our very feet. We are standing by it. I see it all now. The fire pursued them and they descended into the cavern for safety. Lift the stone, pale face, lift the stone, and you will find your boy below."

Richards gazed at the Indian's feet, and saw that he was right.

A large flat stone stood exposed to his view.

CHAPTER X.

THE CAVERN ON THE PRAIRIE.

Nearly overcome by excitement, Richards went over to the huge stone, and as he moved it aside a large opening was seen.

The old Indian warrior, when he gazed below, began again to chant the death song of his tribe.

"Follow me, pale face. This is my old home. Come with me and I will find your son," said Black Hand, as he seized the rung of the ladder and descended into the cavern with a strength that was surprising, considering his condition a few minutes before.

Richards silently followed, and they soon stood side by side in the darkness of the cabin.

"Wait until I get a light, pale face. I brought matches

with me, as I intended to come here if my life lasted: and I know a crevice in the rocks where I hid the pine knots I used for lighting the place."

The Indian groped his way carefully along the side of the cavern.

Richards could distinguish the shuffling of his moccasins as he moved from him.

"The Great Spirit be praised!" exclaimed Black Hand in a loud voice. "I have found them. My own hands placed them there forty years ago."

He lit some, and in a few minutes the cavern was brilliantly lighted.

The chamber that was then unfolded to the anxious eyes of the colonel was a narrow, contracted room.

He gazed into every corner of the place in an instant, and a shade of disappointment settled on his heart.

The Indian noticed the change, and divining its cause, he addressed him.

"The pale face must not be discouraged. There is another chamber adjoining this, and we will search it. Follow me; but be careful how you pass that hole that leads into the subterranean river."

Richards followed where the Indian led, but as he heard the rush of the wild waters, and saw the dark opening above them, he felt a chill rest upon his heart.

Had Harry been thrown into the dark river by one of his enemies?

He dreaded to think of it but quickened his steps until he stood by the side of the old chief.

"Here's the alcove, pale face. We will seek your son here."

"Not much you won't either," replied a man, as he jumped forth and confronted them. "I'm king—I'm cock of the walk. Thar's no sich word as fizzle about me."

"Jack Barry!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Yes, that's me, colonel, and you've got it right, fust time. I don't know how it was that yer found the place, but bein' as yer here, you must remain till the Phantom returns——"

"The Prairie Phantom. Do you mean Wild Warlock?"

"Right ag'in, fust time, colonel. I holds yer as a prisoner, and that palsied old Injun thar, till he comes back. The secret of this place is sacred with Warlock, and he won't have nobody else know it if he can stop it. Most likely he will order me to pitch yer down the hole into the river, colonel, with that old he-squaw thar, and if he does, kerplash—in yer goes."

"This was the home of my forefathers," replied Black Hand, with dignity.

"I don't keer if it belonged to your four grandmothers. It belongs to Warlock now, and nobody else has a right here. Squat, old half-breed, and rest yer limbs. Many a poor pale face yer made bite the dust in your day, I reckon."

"I am a great chief and a great warrior, and you shall die for this," said Black Hand, as he quietly took a tomahawk from a cleft in the rocks, where he had concealed it years before, and hurled it at the head of Barry.

The quick eye of the tavern keeper discovered the movement the moment it was made.

The Indian's feeble strength would not permit him to hurl it with force, but it was aimed with the old-time accuracy.

As it came towards him, Jack seized it by the handle, and threw it, with a scornful laugh, into the dark river.

"There, old black-and-tan, there goes your tommyhawk, an' if yer try that job on again, I'll chuck you in after it."

With a sullen countenance the Indian walked a few steps away, and began, in a low voice, to sing one of the songs of his tribe.

"You will answer me one question, Jack?" pleaded Richards.

"That depends upon whether it's a proper one to ask, colonel."

"Where is my boy?"

"That's a highly improper question, and this court rules it out."

"For heaven's sake, Jack, do not trifle with my feelings. You know where he is."

"Well, suppose I do?"

"You will tell me, then?"

"Well, suppose I don't?"

"I know he is here."

"Who gave you that news, colonel?"

"The Indian followed his trail to the cavern."

"Oho! that's how you came here, is it? This is some of old black-and-tan's work, is it? The old cuss must have lived here at one time, and he's got something hid away in every cleft in the rocks. Perhaps as the Indian has done so much, he might go further and find the boy."

"He is in that alcove, Jack."

"Well, suppose he is, what then?"

"What then, Jack Barry? I will get him out. I am his father, and he is my boy."

Richards made a quick movement to draw his revolver, but Barry jumped forward like a panther, and pressed his pistol against the colonel's head.

"No yer don't, colonel. There ain't no man in these parts can draw a pistol on me afore I can draw mine. Now, drop your hand from that weapon, until I relieve you of it. That's the cheese. Don't try it ag'in, colonel, don't try it ag'in. No man ever tried to draw a weapon twice on Jack Barry and lived afterward to tell of it. I'm king—I'm cock of the walk; there's no such word as fizzle with me."

Then Jack jumped four feet in the air and gave a yell that made the blood in the old chief's heart circulate livelier than it had before in many years.

With a swing of his wrist Barry cast the colonel's revolver into the river to keep company with the old chief's tomahawk.

Harry Richards, who had been sleeping in the alcove, was awakened by the wild yell of Barry.

He had managed during the night to loosen the thongs which bound his wrists and ankles, and when he heard his father's voice in the chamber without, he quietly arose to his feet.

He moved forward noiselessly and threw his arms around the body of Barry, holding him like a vise.

With a yell the Indian and Richards rushed upon the tavern keeper and hurled him to the floor of the cavern.

He struggled with the fury of desperation, but they held him fast.

Harry procured the thongs, and they tied Jack so that he could not move his limbs.

"I'm king now, Jack," said Richards. "I'm the cock of the walk. I'll leave you to account to Wild Warlock for the escape of your charge. Do not cross my path again. I have been to the settlements, and a detachment of troops will be here in a few days to assist in the arrest of the outlaws who infest this region. If you interfere with me or mine again, your name shall be the first on the list."

"All right, colonel. Jack Barry don't skeer for a cent. Thar's no such word as fizzle with me. You've got the upper hand now. I'm the under dog in the fight to-day, colonel. Don't you forget it. I'm king yet, and my word is as good as my bond, and they're both above you."

"Come, Black Hand," said the colonel, "let me assist you to the ladder. We must get away."

"I came here to the home of my fathers," said the chief, slowly, "and I will not depart hence. I have traveled one night and two days to get here. This is the spot where I am like the sun at the close of day; night is coming on, and I must go to sleep with my fathers."

He walked to the edge of the hole, above the dark river, and halted for an instant as he gazed calmly into the rushing waters below.

Then, in a loud voice, he began again to chant the death song of his tribe, and when he reached the last word he gave a wild yell and jumped into the waters below.

With an exclamation of horror, Richards darted forward and looked into the river.

Black Hand was not to be seen.

The rapid current of the river had borne him away.

As he turned to leave the place, a strong hand was placed upon his shoulder, and a pistol was pressed against his temple.

Wild Warlock, the Prairie Phantom, stood there scowling at him with a face like a demon's.

Seeing this, Barry, struggling desperately, succeeded in breaking the thongs that secured him, and rushing madly forward, he caught Harry Richards, lifted him above his head, and holding him over the dark hole above the river, he exclaimed:

"Shall I throw him in, Warlock—shall I throw him in?" He's the one that done the mischief."

"Not yet, Jack—not yet. My revenge is not complete. Bide your time, friend, and we will do that later."

Barry reluctantly placed the boy again upon the ground.

"*Not yet!*" muttered the colonel, as the words struck his heart like twin daggers. "*Not yet!* Then my poor boy is doomed to die. Heaven help us now."

CHAPTER XI.

THE LOST FOUND.

"How came this villain Richards here, Jack?" inquired Warlock.

The hot blood of the colonel rushed to his face as he heard the words.

His fingers itched to seize the man who uttered the words by the throat, but the thought of his son's danger deterred him.

"An old Indian chief brought him here, Warlock."

"Ah! that's how it happened, colonel. So you have found your son. Look upon him, then, for he shall not be here long."

"Are you going to murder him, then?"

"I care not what you may call it, sir, so long as it is done."

"And I suppose you intend to murder me, too, villain," said Richards.

"No, sir; I do not. You shall witness the deed, and then I shall set you free. Do you think I would be so merciful as to end your sorrows here too? No. You shall live, Colonel Richards, to walk the earth a heart-broken man.

"I did not intend that you should come here. I rescued your son from the fire of the prairie, and I kept him here so as to hold your heart in suspense that I might watch your sufferings day by day and see you sink at last into a silent grave."

"Oh, this is terrible!" said Richards. "You will not permit this, Barry. I never wronged you. You will intercede with Warlock and stop this thing. I always was your friend."

"I don't know whether you were or not, colonel. Bill Brooks and his gang burned down my shebang, and they were friends of yours when they did the job. How do I know that you didn't urge them on?"

"I swear by all my hopes hereafter that I had nothing to do with it, Jack."

"That will do for chin music, colonel, but it won't satisfy me."

"Do not plead for me, father," said Harry. "They have hearts of stone, and nothing will move them. I am not afraid to die."

Warlock gazed intently into the pale face of the boy as he spoke.

Harry stood erect, and there was no tremor in his voice.

"There, I will not ask for mercy, boy, from these villains. Now do your worst, but be warned in time. If I leave this cavern alive, I will hunt you both to the ends of the earth to seek revenge."

"That's the way to talk, colonel," said Barry; "but you are the under dog in the fight now. Who's king now? Who's the cock of the walk? You was a few minutes ago, but I am now."

"Seize the boy, Jack, and get ready to drop him in the river," said Warlock.

"All right, my covey," said Jack, as he caught Harry by the arms. "We'll send him arter the black-and-tan Injin. Jingo! when they meets in the happy huntin' grounds what rare sport they will have—eh?"

"I am a father, Warlock," said Richards, overcome with emotion, "and this boy is my son. For the love you bore your father, desist."

"Villain!" exclaimed Warlock, as he seized the colonel by the throat; "do not mention my father's name or you will tempt me to tear you to pieces. You drove him into his grave, and it is to revenge him that I am acting like a demon to-day."

Richards shook himself clear of the trapper, and glared at him in surprise.

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"I—did you say I killed your father, Warlock? You are mistaken. Surely I never saw you before. This is some wild dream."

"Was it a wild dream of mine the day I saw him placed under the sod, Colonel Richards? I came West soon thereafter and under the name of Warlock I have remained since. My mother followed him to the grave soon after. Was that a wild dream, too? My poor sister died ten years ago in poverty and want. Was that a dream? No; I do not dream! I wish I did."

Richards became of a ghastly color, as he listened to the passionate words of the trapper.

It recalled a past history to his mind, and it awoke his conscience to activity again.

"I know now to what you refer, Warlock," said Richards, in a low, sad voice. "You are right. I wronged your father, that is true. Your mother suffered, and I was to blame. You are seeking revenge. I do not blame you, for under the same provocation, I would do no less. But will you hear me say a word before you kill my son?"

Warlock gave a gesture of impatience, but Barry at the critical moment came to the rescue.

"Let the colonel spit it out, Warlock. Words ain't bullets, and they can't kill us. Go on and make it short and p'inted."

"Your father's name was Caspar Woods. Am I right, Warlock?"

"You are. Mine is Edward Woods. Now you know me. Go on."

"I remember you now, although you were but a stripling at that time, Warlock. I entered into partnership with your father. I was an honest man, and I hoped to do justly by him, but I became infatuated with the wild desire to speculate with the firm's money in stocks. I lost. I tried again, hoping to retrieve my fortunes. I lost again. The firm failed.

"I left the city and went East. I again embarked in business with the money furnished me by my father. I succeeded. I made a large fortune, retired from business, and came West. Why? To seek your mother and pay her the money I had unjustly defrauded my old partner, your father, of. I had kept an account of it to the last cent.

"She had died in the meantime, Warlock, and I searched for you. I was informed that you had started for the West some years before, and again I was disappointed. I sought the whereabouts of your sister——"

"And you found her in her grave also," said Warlock, bitterly.

"You are in error; she was not dead. I paid her the money to the last fraction. It was all I could do. I had no right to use the firm's money as I did, and I do not attempt to defend my conduct. My only explanation is that my desire to gamble in stocks was so intense that I could no more resist it than a drunkard can resist the craving for liquor.

"I had no child but Harry, and I implored your sister to become a member of my family. I had robbed her of her father, and I beseeched her to become my child; she consented. She loved you, her brother, and at her urgent entreaties I sold my homestead and came West to settle, that thus we might be better able to seek you out and bring you too into our household."

"It is all alike, Richards," exclaimed Warlock, furiously. "You have trumped up the story to impose upon me, but you have not succeeded. Do you say that my sister Tillie is here with you now?"

"I do, solemnly."

"Where is she?"

"In the mansion on the ranch."

"Oh, see here," exclaimed Barry, "thar's too much palaver about this business. What I want to know is, whether this boy is to be chucked in the river or not. I'm as hungry as an old grizzly bear, and I want to get the job over so I can take a chaw. Wind it up; I never did like those long-winded yarns."

"You have tried to deceive me, Richards, and your boy's fate is sealed. Chuck him in, Jack," said Warlock.

Barry seized the boy and raised him over the water. A pale-faced girl dressed in white hurriedly descended the ladder, and with a cry of joy ran to Harry, threw her arms around his neck and pressed him convulsively to her bosom, while she covered his face with kisses.

When she appeared, Warlock started back, terror-stricken.

His limbs trembled violently as he glared at her; his eyes looked as though they would start from their sockets.

"Why, what's up now, Warlock?" whispered Barry, as he hurried to his friend's side. "You are beside yourself again. Close them peepers, and don't stare like that. What in thunder is it that you're gazin' it?"

"Look, Jack. Don't you see it?" said Warlock, in a hoarse voice.

"See it? See what?"

"*The ghost. The ghost.* It just entered here. I saw it once before, the night we burned Richards' barn."

"That was a woman entered here, Warlock. Do yer think I can't tell real genuine flesh and blood when I see it?"

"It ain't a ghost, you say. Who is she, then?"

"Your sister, Warlock," replied Richards. "You would not believe me; perhaps if you tell him, Tillie, that you are not dead, he will listen to you."

"My brother—my dear brother Edward! Do you not recognize me?" said Tillie, as she ran to him and threw her arms about his neck. "We have been seeking you everywhere, and we have found you at last."

"My poor sister," said Warlock, in a low, tender voice. "I heard that you were dead, and I mourned you as one lost to me forever. Colonel Richards has told me that he made reparation for his past misdeeds. Is it true, sister?"

"It is. He has made every reparation that he could possibly make. No father could have been more thoughtful and affectionate than he has been towards me. You must abandon this mode of life and come and live with us. We came West to see you, brother, and I will never consent to part with you again."

"No, I cannot do that, Tillie," replied Warlock. "I have been his bitter enemy. I fired his barn, and would have killed him. I saved Harry from the prairie fire, and out of revenge for the injury done my father I would have taken his life. I did not know then that Colonel Richards had made an honorable settlement."

"I don't blame you, Warlock, for what you did," said Richards. "I am content to forget the past, and I offer you my hand in friendship. Will you accept it, and can you forget the injury I did you and yours?"

"I can and will, colonel," said Warlock. "There's my hand. Let the past be forgotten."

He seized the proffered hand of the colonel, and shook it warmly.

"Then there aren't a-goin' to be any killin' done, after all," said Barry. "It's lucky you came here, Miss Tillie. If you hadn't this boy here would have been dipped in the river long ago. How was it you happened to drop in here on us at this critical moment?"

"The colonel's horse returned to the house without his rider," said Tillie. "I became so anxious in regard to his safety that I could not resist the impulse to go in search of him. I mounted the horse and started in this direction? As I rode along, I heard the sound of angry voices and traced them here. I recognized the colonel's voice, and descended hastily. You know the rest."

"Come, let us quit this place, Warlock," said Richards. "We will go to the ranch. My home shall be your home hereafter."

They left the cavern and in a short time reached the ranch.

Warlock changed his mode of life, and persons who saw him a few years thereafter failed to recognize in the polished manners and gentlemanly bearing of Edward Woods, the adopted son of Colonel Richards, the form of Wild Warlock, the Prairie Phantom.

Bill Brooks and his followers did not long survive their treacherous conduct to Colonel Richards.

In order to escape being dragged to prison, they went into the far West, and while traveling through the woods they were attacked by a war party of Sioux and killed.

The news of their terrible fate caused great rejoicing among the friends of Wild Warlock.

As to Jack Barry, he went to work in his usual energetic manner, and in a few days after Warlock had given up his old trapper life, the lumber arrived from the village and he built another tavern.

On the opening day, a large crowd assembled to greet the popular proprietor of the "Wild Buffalo," and in the midst of the festivities, Barry jumped upon the counter, waved his hands above his head and yelled out, accompanied by the cheers of his friends, the good old cry that had so often, in days past, quelled the border ruffians that sometimes straggled into his place:

"I'm king—I'm cock of the walk! There's no such word as fizzle with me!"

THE END.

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CHOICE READING MATTER.

Friend—You've never been called in consultation, have you? Young Doctor—No, but I'd like to be. It's nice to charge ten times as much as the other doctor for saying that you don't know any more about the case than he does.

"What's your husband doing now?" asked the neighbor. "Oh, he's sitting around telling what is going to happen next election," answered the busy woman. "Then he's a prophet?" "No, he isn't. So far as this family is concerned he is a dead loss."

Mrs. Malaprop—"Young Sharp will have to apologize before I'll speak to him again." Miss Interest—"Did he insult you?" Mrs. Malaprop—"Did he? The last time I met him I told him that my uncle, Lord de Style, had locomotive atacksia, and he had the impudence to ask if he 'whistled at crossings.' He's an unsympathetic brute."

"Look, mamma, at the nice big hole I cut out of the dollar bill Uncle Ned gave me!" gleefully cried little Bobby, holding up the mutilated long-green for his mother's inspection. "Oh, you young villain!" exclaimed mamma, "what did you do that for?" "Why," said Bobby, tearfully, "only yesterday I heard papa tell Mr. Galey that every night he went to the club he made a big hole in a ten-dollar bill!"

A story is told of a Frenchman who was very anxious to see an American business man at his home. The first morning when he called at the house the maid replied to his query: "The master is not down yet," meaning downstairs. The following morning he called again, and was met with: "The master is not up yet," meaning that he had not yet arisen from his bed. The Frenchman, looking at her with doubtful eye, paused for a few seconds. "Eet ees very deefcult, but eef ze mademoiselle will tell me when ze master will be neither up nor down, but in ze middle, zen I vill call at zat time."

He was selling suspenders on the street, but he declared that, in his palmy days, he had been Prof. Piccolomini, the lion tamer. "What made you give it up?" he was asked. "Well, you see, it was this way. Once I was engaged to tame a lion called Frederick Barbarossa, who was certainly a wild proposition. But I was equal to the task. By slow and gradual steps I taught Frederick good manners. I used to walk into his cage, snap a whip, make him do stunts, and all that sort of thing. Everything went along beautifully. But I got into trouble when I tried to teach Frederick to eat out of my hand." "How?" "Why, he ate three fingers out of my hand, confound him! Have a pair of Gem suspenders? They work without hitching. Twenty-five cents."

The crop of hazel nuts in Clark County, Ore., for this year has been enormous. Every bush is laden with nuts and all the boys and girls are storing large quantities for winter use. One family has the banner pick of four bushels of shelled nuts in one day. That the cultivated hazel nut, or filbert, is admirably adapted to this climate has been demonstrated by a number of growers, among them John E. Norelius, of Kauffman Avenue extension, who has seven acres of trees in excellent condition. There are thirty trees to the acre, planted ten feet apart. The culture is profitable to the grower, as the nuts bring ten and fifteen cents a pound. The trees bear a few nuts the first year, the crop increasing yearly until the ten-year-old trees are bearing about ten pounds of nuts. At a market price of 15 cents, 300 trees to an acre and ten pounds to the tree, the net sum of $450 an acre can be realized.

RIB TICKLERS.

She—I hear that Mr. and Mrs. Newlywed have just joined the church. He—Well, turn about is fair play. Didn't the church join them?

Tom—And when you proposed she gave you a sweet answer? Dick—She did, indeed. Tom—Ah, she said, "Yes?" Dick—No; she said, "Fudge."

"At least, the audience didn't hiss," remarked the playwright, after the unsuccessful first night.

"No," replied the manager sadly. "They were too sleepy."

Anxious Mother—Oh, professor, don't you think my dear little Reginald will ever learn to draw?

Professor Crayon—No, madam; not unless you harness him up to a truck.

Mrs. Gudethyng—Why did you have to leave the army?

Wayward Cuffdrop—Well, you see, I was in the hospital most of the time; the food was too rich for me. I was used to living in a boarding house."

"Pop, I've discovered why those natives that assist a hunter in Africa are called 'beaters.'"

"Quite sure, are you, Little Nimrod? What's the answer?"

"Why, when the game turns on them, they beat it!"

Harold was going to a party that evening. As the weather was rather doubtful, his father gave him a half-dollar and told him to get a cab if it rained when he came home. It did rain and rained hard. When Harold came home he was drenched. "I thought I told you to get a cab if it rained," said his father. "And so I did," was the reply. "I had a dandy ride, and came home on top, beside the driver."

Two men whose offices were on the second floor were on the first floor waiting for an elevator. Long and impatiently they waited.

"You're not looking extra well, Londsel," remarked the lawyer.

"No, Rangle," replied the real estate man. "Think I'll join an athletic club. I need the exercise."

"Me, too."

Still they waited for the elevator.

A DETECTIVE'S PECULIAR EXPERIENCE

By D. W. Stevens.

When I was located in Baltimore some years ago the incidents I am about to relate occurred, and I met with one of the most peculiar experiences that ever came in my way during a long and arduous career as a detective.

I was just twenty-five years of age then, a bachelor, and yet without many of the romantic notions peculiar to young men of my age, for, in fact, my life has thus far been such a busy one that I had not found time to fall in love.

One evening I was walking up Charles Street on my way home from the office, when I passed an imposing mansion upon what was then the most aristocratic portion of this thoroughfare.

It was late in the fall, and the days were becoming short. The lamps were burning upon the street, and the darkness had closed down, although it was but little after five o'clock.

As I came opposite the mansion of which I have made mention, I heard a shrill but half-stifled cry in a woman's voice, the door of the mansion opened, and a female rushed from the house.

The next instant she was followed by a tall, majestic woman, who dashed down the walk, leading to the street, in pursuit of the first.

The object of the second woman's pursuit was a slender, girlish figure.

She reached the street gate and strove to open it, but for a moment she failed to move the catch that secured it, and her pursuer was close upon her when the gate yielded, and the girl rushed out upon the pavement.

The woman who was following her now rushed through the gate, and she was close upon the girlish female who was endeavoring to escape when I caught the glittering flash of a dagger in her hand as the lamplight was reflected from its polished steel blade.

At sight of me she uttered an exclamation of fear and surprise, and turning like a flash, she fled back to the house and vanished within it.

The girl whom it had been my fortune to protect from an enraged, and evidently dangerous woman, clung tremblingly to my arm.

"Thank you, sir, for your timely interposition in my behalf," she said, in a musical voice.

"Not at all, miss. But will you not explain the meaning of this remarkable scene?" I replied.

The girl hesitated, and in that moment a carriage, which had been approaching, drew up in front of the house.

"I cannot, I dare not explain. My father has arrived, and now I shall be safe even from her," said the young lady, and thanking me again, she hurried to the carriage and affectionately greeted a tottering old gentleman, who seemed almost in his dotage, as a liveried footman assisted him to alight from his elegant coupe.

I walked onward, thinking of what had just occurred, and, as I had obtained a distinct view of the two ladies between whom I had interposed, perhaps by so doing preventing a tragedy, their portraits were indelibly stamped upon the camera of my brain.

The following morning, as I passed a small drugstore upon a side street, near the residence in which the women in whose lives I had become interested lived, I saw the dark woman—she of the dagger—enter it.

Acting upon the impulse of the moment, I followed her. She purchased a bottle of vitriol.

When she retired from the store I questioned the druggist, who chanced to be a friend of mine.

In this way I learned that the lady was Mrs. Bremond, the second wife of the old Mr. Bremond, who resided in the mansion from whence I saw the woman rush the preceding night.

My informant also told me that the master of the house was a wealthy Southern gentleman, and a former resident of New Orleans, where he understood he had married his young and beautiful wife, who was but twenty, and in the full bloom and fire of womanhood, while her husband was in the neighborhood of seventy, and "a tottering old dotard with one foot in the grave," as the druggist put it.

This was about all I learned from the druggist, but in the course of the day I learned by means of a female who was one of our employes, that the young lady whom I had saved from the enraged Mrs. Bremond was old Mr. Bremond's daughter by his first wife, and that at the present time there was a young gentleman visiting at Mr. Bremond's who claimed to be a very distant relative of Mrs. Bremond.

I was also told that at the present time the inmates of Mr. Bremond's mansion consisted of himself, his wife, his daughter Edna, Perrie De Chambour, the young gentleman guest, and six servants, among whom a mulatto girl called Crissie, who was Miss Edna's maid, may be specially mentioned.

A day or two later I was walking in a retired portion of Druid Hill Park where the trees grew thick and the undergrowth had been permitted to grow for a season or two unpruned, when I came upon a lady and gentleman who were so earnestly engaged in conversation that they did not observe my approach.

I drew back, and, concealed by a massive tree-trunk, I saw and heard all.

The lady was Mrs. Bremond, and the gentleman was Mr. Bremond's guest, Perrie De Chambour.

The lady's first words told me that this was the name by which her companion was known in Baltimore, but I had a previous knowledge of him, and now I knew he was living under an assumed name.

He was a gambler and a villain, as I well knew, but he was a handsome scoundrel and a ladykiller.

"Yes, my beautiful Corrine, as soon as your ancient husband shuffles off this mortal coil—that is, if he does not live to the age of Met., that aged gentleman referred to in the Good Book, you know—you shall be my wife," said De Chambour.

"And then we will spend his money, notwithstanding his spiteful daughter. Oh, how I hate that girl!" hissed the woman, whom I now began to regard as a beautiful demon.

"Yes, we will find a way to quiet Miss Edna, should she trouble us," said De Chambour.

"And you are sure, Perrie, that you do not care for her, that you love only me?" asked the faithless woman.

"Only you, Corrine," the man replied.

"I will believe you; but I have been jealous, and if you did love that white-faced girl I should kill her!" the beautiful woman hissed.

"Fear not, my adorable Corrine. You have not the slightest cause for jealousy, I can assure you," said her companion.

For some time longer they conversed, and then the woman said:

"I must return now. My carriage will be in waiting at the refreshment cottage by the lake at this hour."

Mrs. Bremond walked away, and when the foliage concealed her De Chambour coolly lighted a cigar and strolled away in the opposite direction.

I followed the scoundrel, and in a secluded part of the park he met Edna Bremond.

"Ah, Edna," he exclaimed, as he came up to the girl, and

before she could prevent it he caught one of her hands in his and put his arms about her waist. At the same moment I heard a sound in the shrubbery, and from my place of concealment I saw the face of Mrs. Bremond—Corrine—peering through the bushes behind De Chambour.

The face of the woman was convulsed with passion.

For a moment only she remained there, and then, with a menacing gesture, she glided away.

Edna Bremond indignantly withdrew herself from De Chambour.

"Pardon me, Edna—Miss Bremond; my love caused me for the moment to forget myself, for I do love you, Edna, and I ask you to be my wife," said the villain.

The girl drew herself up proudly, and for the moment she regarded him in scornful silence.

"It was not a desire for your society, Mr. De Chambour, that caused me to make this appointment with you. Oh, no! I had a very different purpose in view. I understand what is going on, and I came here to ask you, as a man, to spare my poor old father this disgrace. Do not estrange from him the woman he has made his wife. Go away, and I will try to think that you yet possess some manly principle," said the girl, impassionately.

"*Never*," hissed De Chambour.

"You are a villain and a scoundrel!" said Edna, and turning her back upon him, contemptuously walked away.

I followed Edna Bremond, for I feared for her safety, and anticipated that she would encounter her father's wife.

In this I was right.

Edna Bremond had not proceeded far when she was confronted by Mrs. Bremond.

"Treacherous girl!" hissed Corrine.

"What mean you?" cried Edna.

"You know well enough. You have broken your promise," hissed Corrine.

"What promise?"

"The day following the night when you threatened to tell your father and Perrie the secret of my parentage, and I, in my madness and dread of exposure, followed you with a dagger, you promised to keep my secret if I would have nothing more to do with Perrie De Chambour. I said that I would not encourage him more if you would swear to refuse him should he offer to make you his wife, and if you would also swear to keep the secret of my parentage. Now, but a short time ago, I saw you and Perrie De Chambour meet as lovers," said Mrs. Bremond.

"I grant you that I promised to keep your secret if you would send De Chambour away; but you have not kept your part of our agreement, as you well know. If, however, you think that I met Perrie De Chambour as though he was my lover, you do me the greatest injustice," said Edna.

"Ha! ha! ha! laughed the beautiful demon, in a sneering manner.

Then she said:

"Actions speak louder than words; but you shall not win Perrie De Chambour, that I swear. Suppose I do not send him away according to my promise, girl, what will you do?"

"In that case, I shall speak the truth. I shall tell my father the secret of your parentage, and he will turn from you in disgust when he knows the truth, for the prejudices of years cannot be overcome by one of his age and race," replied Edna.

"You think you will ruin me, and that I shall be separated from your father—cast adrift with perhaps a pittance of his fortune—but you do not know me, Edna Bremond. I'll have my revenge, and as Perrie De Chambour fancies your pale face, its beauty shall be spoiled forever," cried the beautiful demon, and with these words, embodying a terrible threat, she hurried away.

Some time later, when Edna left the park, I played the part of a shadow.

I felt a presentiment that she was soon to meet a dreadful peril, and I stepped forward as she paused at the gate of her father's residence.

She recognized me with a smile, and said:

"You are the gentleman who protected me the other evening?"

"Yes," I replied, "and I am here now to warn you to be constantly on your guard against your father's wife. She is a beautiful demon, and she means to injure you."

The girl shuddered.

"I am a detective, miss, and you can trust me," said.

"Then I will ask you to take your place on yonder porch, where you can see within the parlor of my home through the long windows, for it may be that this woman will attempt to take my life, as my father is absent, and she is reckless of all consequences," said Miss Bremond.

A moment later she entered the parlor, of which I commanded a good view.

At the same moment Mrs. Bremond rushed from a place of concealment behind a curtain.

"Thus do I spoil that doll's face of yours forever!" she hissed, and as she spoke she hurled the contents of the bottle filled with vitriol which I saw her purchase at Edna's head.

Simultaneously with the action on the part of the beautiful demon, a mulatto girl, who I afterward learned was Crissie, Edna's maid, of whom I have made mention, sprang between Edna, whom she dearly loved, and Mrs. Bremond.

The poor girl received upon her head and shoulders the vitriol intended for her mistress.

I rushed through the front door and into the parlor.

"Curse you—curse you!" screamed the mulatto girl, in pain and rage. "Now I will reveal the truth! *You are my half-sister. The same mother bore us both, Corrine.* My father was a mulatto. Yours was a white man. Proud Mr. Bremond shall know from my lips that his wife is the daughter of a negress!"

With a cry of despair Mrs. Bremond fled from the room.

From the day I saw Mrs. Bremond purchase the vitriol I had carried upon my person a bottle of oil, and I instantly poured it upon the face of the mulatto girl, thus in a measure saving her from the terrible consequences of her half-sister's mad act.

I then escorted Edna and the devoted colored girl to the house of an intimate friend, for they could not remain in the same house with the beautiful demon, as Mr. Bremond was not expected to return that night.

But he did return, and the next morning he was found dead, stabbed to the heart, and his wife was missing, as were also the family diamonds and the contents of a safe which her husband kept in his room, and which had contained some ten thousand dollars, besides valuable papers.

I at once started to track the beautiful demon, while poor old Mr. Bremond, whose love for her had proven a *fatal love*, was buried in the tomb of his ancestors.

The beautiful demon was a cunning woman, but I tracked her to New Orleans, from whence she and De Chambour took passage on a French merchantman bound for South America; but the vessel with all on board was lost during a terrible storm in the Gulf of Mexico, and thus the guilty woman escaped answering for her crime at the bar of justice, for she was called before a higher tribunal in all her guilt and wickedness.

Edna came into possession of her father's entire fortune, and as, strange to say, despite the romantic nature of the case, I had not fallen in love with her, she eventually married an estimable man who made her an excellent husband.

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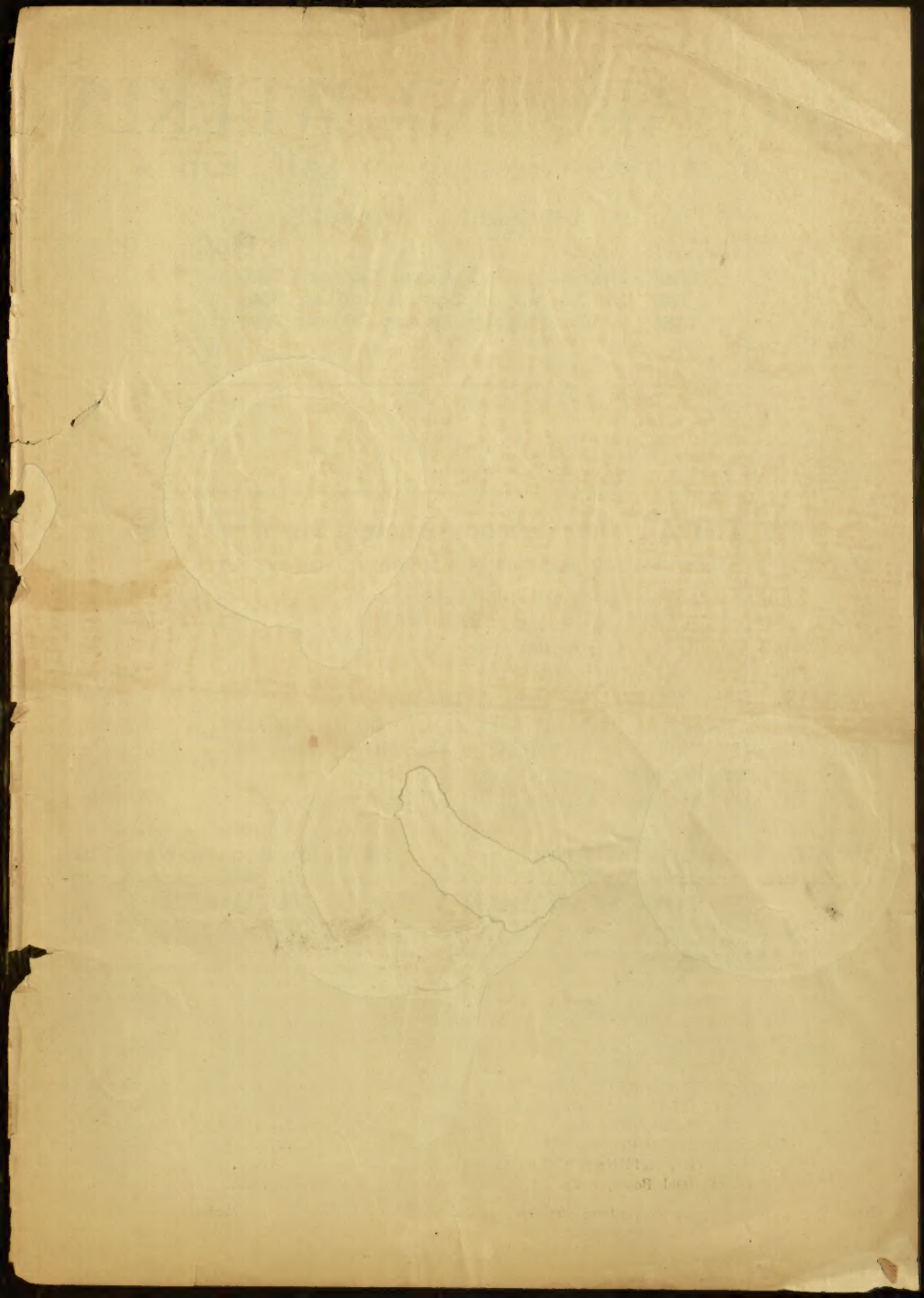

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